

STAR
WARS™



Jedi Apprentice Omnibus

Volume Four

Jude Watson



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Jedi Apprentice: The Death of Hope
Jedi Apprentice: The Call to Vengeance
Jedi Apprentice: The Only Witness
Jedi Apprentice: The Threat Within
Jedi Apprentice: Special Edition: The Followers
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This book is not to be sold or distributed!

Includes

Jedi Apprentice

**Books Fifteen Through Eighteen
&
Special Edition: The Followers**

STAR WARS Timeline



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Volume Three: Force War



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Crimson Empire

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Crimson Empire
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24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

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 STAR WARS: A New Hope**

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36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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**40-139 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury

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Book Fifteen
The Death of Hope

Chapter One

Obi-Wan Kenobi kept his eyes on his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn. He did not like to break Qui-Gon's concentration, but he was impatient to know what his Master was thinking.

They sat in the small, elegant waiting room at the Supreme Governor's residence on the planet of New Apsolon. A lightsaber lay on a small table next to Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon didn't move his eyes from it. Every few minutes he would pick up the hilt and hold it in his hand. He had even activated it a few times, losing himself in the sapphire glow. Then he would deactivate it and, still holding it tightly, get up to pace the room. In just moments he would abruptly whirl, slam the lightsaber down on the table again, and sit.

The process had been going on for some time now.

Obi-Wan was sure that his Master was formulating a plan. Jedi Knight Tahl had been kidnapped. They knew who the culprit was – Balog, the Chief Security Controller of New Apsolon. They just did not know why, or where Balog had taken her. Tahl had not been able to leave any clues behind.

Obi-Wan was trying to come up with the best course of action himself. He hadn't gotten far. They both doubted that Balog was acting alone, but they didn't know who he was in league with. Confidently, Obi-Wan waited for Qui-Gon to

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conclude his internal strategy session. He had seen it in the past. His Master would turn and look at him directly. His gaze would be sharp and focused. He would crisply outline the best way to proceed.

Qui-Gon turned to him at last. "I should have gone with her to that meeting," he said sadly.

Startled, Obi-Wan could only shake his head. Qui-Gon never wasted time on what they *should* have done. "But Balog told us that only one Jedi was allowed."

"I should have made her leave the planet when it was clear her identity was compromised." Tahl had gone undercover and pretended to be one of the Absolutes. They had once been the secret police of New Apsolon, and had since been outlawed. They had never disbanded, though, and had continued to meet in secret, gathering power over the years.

"But she would not have left." Obi-Wan spoke patiently. He wasn't telling Qui-Gon anything his Master did not know already. "We need to contact the Temple. They will send help."

"Not yet." Qui-Gon's tone was firm. "We know now that there are many here who hate and resent the Jedi. If more Jedi arrive, it will make it harder for us to find contacts to help us. Especially among the Workers."

"But a Jedi Knight is missing," Obi-Wan said. "It is our duty to contact the Council."

"And we will," Qui-Gon told him. "But we need twenty-four hours first. We will find her, Obi-Wan. I can *feel* her. I know she is alive. I know she will find a way to help us once we get on her trail." Qui-Gon returned to his pacing. "We should talk to Balog's assistant again."

"We've already spoken to him twice," Obi-Wan said quietly. "Both of us felt sure he had nothing more to tell us." It would feel strange and awkward to tell his own Master to focus, as Qui-Gon had told him so many times. Yet Obi-Wan felt that Qui-Gon needed to slow down. His Master's thoughts were circling in a pattern that would lead nowhere. Obi-Wan could see it clearly,

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for he had been taught by Qui-Gon how to think calmly in the midst of panic, how to find a way out.

Qui-Gon knew this. Why couldn't he practice it?

Obi-Wan could see anguish and desperation on Qui-Gon's face, and something it took a beat for him to recognize – indecision. With a sense of shock, he realized that Qui-Gon did not know what to do next. Qui-Gon always knew what to do next.

Obi-Wan decided to use a method Qui-Gon had for helping to focus. *If you don't know which way to turn, review what you know.*

"This is what we know," Obi-Wan began, even though he could tell that Qui-Gon was only half-listening. Obi-Wan was starting to worry about his Master, and that was taking his own attention from the task at hand. "There are two factions battling for power on New Apsolon – the Workers and the Civilized. The government is in disarray. Before we arrived on New Apsolon, the Supreme Governor, Ewane, was assassinated. He was a Worker who had been imprisoned for many years by the Absolutes. After his death, his close ally, Roan, was elected. Though Roan was a Civilized, he had fought for the Workers to become full citizens of New Apsolon. He took in Ewane's twin daughters, Alani and Eritha. But Alani and Eritha still feared for their lives. They contacted the Jedi to escort them off-planet."

Qui-Gon stirred impatiently. "We know all this, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan had once been impatient when Qui-Gon repeated facts to him. But Qui-Gon had always ignored his impatience and continued. Now it was Obi-Wan's turn to push forward.

"Tahl came to the planet alone and infiltrated the disbanded Absolutes, who had gone underground. After we arrived, Eritha and Alani were kidnapped. Roan disappeared to pay the ransom and was killed. Shortly afterward, the twins were released, which led us to believe that Roan was the true target all along. Tahl's identity as a Jedi was discovered but she escaped. She went to a peace negotiation meeting of Workers and Civilized organized by Balog. Only we have discovered that there was no meeting. Balog

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lied in order to kidnap Tahl. The question is, why? Balog was a Worker. It doesn't seem likely he'd kidnap a Jedi."

"Anything is likely on this planet," Qui-Gon said grimly, shoving Tahl's lightsaber into his belt.

"Another question is whether Tahl's kidnapping is linked to the twins," Obi-Wan went on. "Was Balog responsible for that, too? If so, he is most likely responsible for the murder of Roan.

Irin gave us information from the Workers that suggested that the person who masterminded the twins' kidnapping was in the inner circle here. But why Balog?"

Qui-Gon's gaze was clear now. "We don't know the answers to any of these questions," he said. "But it seems clear that it is all linked – Ewane's assassination, Roan's murder, the kidnapping of the twins – and that someone or some organization is behind these things. They want power."

"So kidnapping Tahl is a way for them to get that power? How?"

"Uncovering the answers will take longer than a day. Time we don't have. We need to find Tahl first." Qui-Gon turned back to Obi-Wan. "What was the principal method the Absolutes used to keep the Workers in line?"

"Probe droids," Obi-Wan answered after a moment. "The droids on New Apsolon are technologically advanced. They can track subjects and attack to stun or kill. The vital information of all Workers was kept in files, and with that information a probe droid could be programmed to target a specific person – " Obi-Wan slowly rose. "Of course. Balog is a Worker. If we can get his vitals – "

"And a probe droid," Qui-Gon finished.

A soft voice came from behind them. "But they are illegal now."

It was Alani. The slight sixteen-year-old stood in the doorway for a moment, dressed in a simple tunic, her golden hair braided and coiled around her head. She had dark smudges under her eyes. The twins had stayed awake mourning Roan, and the news

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of Tahl's disappearance had devastated them. Tahl and the twins had a special bond.

She took a few steps into the room. "I didn't mean to overhear. I came to see if I can bring you refreshment."

"We'd rather have a probe droid," Qui-Gon said.

"I might be able to help you with that as well," Alani said. "At least, I know someone who can find one. Lenz."

"Lenz," Obi-Wan said, repeating the name. Lenz had been among the Workers in a secret meeting he and Qui-Gon had overheard.

"He is the leader of the Workers," Alani said. "He will say he doesn't know how to get one, but that's a lie. Tell him I sent you."

"You know him well?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Lenz took us in when our father was imprisoned," Alani said. "So yes, I know him well. We are not in touch anymore, but he will help you if I ask him to. The trouble will be finding him. He moves from place to place."

"We have no time to waste," Obi-Wan said in frustration. "Would they need a probe droid to track Lenz, too?"

Alani frowned, thinking. "Irimi will know how to find him. She will be at her job at the Absolute Museum by now."

The Jedi knew Irimi. But knowing her didn't mean she would help them. She was a prominent leader in the Worker movement, and she had made it clear that she did not consider the Jedi her allies. They suspected her of trying to kill them when they had first arrived on New Apsolon. But there was no one else to turn to.

Chapter Two

It had been a time of great confusion for Qui-Gon. It had been as though his body temperature had risen, as if there was a fever in his blood. He had been restless and irritable. Deep meditation was hard to sustain. Tired of waiting for a mission to distract him, he had taken Obi- Wan on a survival trip to Ragoon-6, hoping the discipline would calm his mind and body. It had not.

The first vision appeared on Ragoon-6. He saw Tabl in distress. In his vision, he caught and held her. Her body felt so weak. He was filled with helplessness and fear.

When he returned to the Temple, anxious to find her, he discovered that Tabl was on the verge of leaving on a mission to New Apsolon. Qui-Gon could not interfere. Yet after she had gone he was once again visited by that same disturbing vision. He knew she was headed for danger. He knew that she would need him. He knew she would resist his help.

He did not need Yoda to tell him that visions should not serve as a guide for behavior. He did not listen to the Council when they cautioned him to wait. He left for New Apsolon, drawn by a compulsion he did not understand. He had to follow her.

But the most important thing had not become clear. Why had the visions of Tabl in trouble come to him, haunted him, driven him? Why did just the sight of her suddenly irritate him and warm him at the same time?

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Then, in one blinding moment, he had received his answer. He had felt a shock so deep it seemed his body could not contain it. He had found that he was not just a Jedi, but a man. And the fever in his blood was Tahl.

Courage was something a Jedi did not think about. It was simply the will to do right. It was the discipline to move forward. Qui-Gon had never had to reach for it; it had always been there, ready for him. It deserted him when he asked to speak to Tahl alone.

He had poured out his heart as only a quiet man could. He had used few words. The time it took for her to respond had seemed endless. Then she had taken a step forward, taken his hand, and pledged her life to his. They would have one life, together, she had said.

What an astonishing lesson, Qui-Gon thought, to find that joy was such a simple thing. It sprang from a single, shining source. She said yes. She said yes.

As they walked the short distance to the museum, Qui-Gon had to discipline himself severely to recall his Jedi training. He knew that his Padawan was troubled by his behavior. It was true that for the first time since he was a young Temple student, he was having trouble with his focus.

In the midst of every battle, every trouble, Qui-Gon had always been able to find his calm center. When he reached for it now, it was gone. Replacing it was a core of turbulent, angry chaos, fueled by his guilt and his fear.

This was the time he must operate at the peak of his efficiency. This was the time that called for his most intense focus.

The cold fear that lay deep within him was not just for Tahl. He was also afraid of his own doubt.

He had never been so at a loss because he had never felt like this before. Only hours ago, he and Tahl had pledged their lives to each other. The emotion and the need had surprised them both. Once they had accepted it, it had felt like the most natural thing in the world. Qui-Gon was astonished to discover that he

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had found one person who mattered to him more than anything else in the galaxy.

And now he had lost her.

"Qui-Gon?"

Obi-Wan jolted him out of his jumbled thoughts. He saw that he had paused in front of the museum's wide double doors.

"The museum is closed," Obi-Wan said. "It's too early."

"It opens in fifteen minutes. No doubt the guides are here."

The museum had been built shortly after the government of Apsolon reorganized and became New Apsolon. As a show of good faith, the government opened the doors of the hated headquarters of the Absolutes. People were free to come and acknowledge the horrors that had been done there. It was, the leaders felt, a way to prevent the horrors from happening again. Former victims of Absolute repression had come forward and obtained jobs as guides to the complex. This was how the Jedi had met Irini.

Qui-Gon pressed the off-hours signal button. He heard it ring inside. No one came.

Qui-Gon pounded on the door. He could not wait fifteen minutes. He could not wait one second more than he had to.

The door slid open. Irini stood in her guide uniform. She glowered at the Jedi.

"The museum is not open yet."

"We saw that," Qui-Gon said, striding past her.

"This is outrageous," Irini said. "I came to you with information about Roan's murder. I trusted you. The next thing I knew, you ran off and security threw me out of the Governor's house."

"Balog has kidnapped Tahl," Qui-Gon told her, his voice struggling to remain even.

Irini gasped. Then, after a visible struggle, her face resumed its smooth mask. Her voice hardened. "I see," she said after a moment. "So Balog is the traitor to our cause. He is the one behind the kidnapping of the twins and Roan's murder."

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Despite Irini's control, Qui-Gon sensed that this news had deeply upset her.

"He will be a formidable enemy," she murmured.

"The only thing we know for sure is that Balog kidnapped Tahl," Obi- Wan said. "We don't know why."

"We need a probe droid," Qui-Gon said. "It's the fastest way to track Balog. Alani told us Lenz could get one."

"Lenz does not keep me informed as to his movements," Irini said brusquely. "I am not his keeper."

Qui-Gon felt his impatience tighten another notch. Every minute that ticked by took Tahl farther from him, made her trail colder. Irini stood in the way.

He studied her for a moment. Irini's navy tunic was buttoned up to her neck, and her black hair was slicked back severely. There was not a flicker of warmth in her eyes. She was dedicated to the Workers' cause, and thought the Jedi were too friendly to the Civilized faction. Qui-Gon knew from experience how tough Irini could be. But he would not go away until he got what he wanted.

She saw something in his gaze and quickly turned away. "I have to work," she said.

"No." Qui-Gon's voice was soft, but it stopped her in her tracks. He told himself to go slowly. Irini would not respond to threats or intimidation. She would dig in her heels.

"Just hours ago you came to us with information," he said. "You trusted us. We trusted your information."

"Your Jedi has been kidnapped," Irini said, her head still turned away and her voice muffled. "I am sorry for that, but I am not responsible. It is Jedi business. One thing I do know-the Absolutes do not take kindly to betrayal."

"How did you know that Tahl infiltrated the Absolutes?" Qui-Gon asked urgently. He took three steps toward her in order to see her face. "And why do you think they had something to do with her kidnapping?"

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She lifted her chin defiantly. "What does it matter? We are not on the same side, Jedi."

"But we are," Obi-Wan said. "You are against the Absolutes. If they kidnapped Tahl, she may know things that you want to know."

There was logic in what Obi-Wan said but Qui-Gon didn't think Irini would care. Yet something in Obi-Wan's words caused her to stop and give them a hard stare.

"I might be able to find Lenz," she said reluctantly.

"Then let's go," Qui-Gon said firmly. He had to keep pushing forward. He had to drown out his worst fears with action.

They had only caught a glimpse of Lenz the first time they'd seen him, but Qui-Gon remembered him well. His was not a face to forget. It had been marked by suffering and illness, but there was nobility and strength in it. His body was weak, yet his spirit had great power. In a crowd he might be ignored, but Qui-Gon knew from the first glance that he was a leader.

Lenz stood as Irini led the Jedi into a small room in the Worker section of the city. She had alerted him by comlink that they were coming, and why.

Lenz gave Irini a questioning look. "Now you trust the Jedi? What happened?"

"They have a good point," Irini said. "They have the best chance of finding Tahl. If Balog betrayed us for the Absolutes, we need to know."

Lenz kept his gaze on Irini. Slowly, he nodded. "Maybe."

His nerves on alert, Qui-Gon sensed something had passed between Irini and Lenz. It had been a wordless exchange of information. They knew each other very well, he realized. Well enough to speak without words, as he and his Padawan could.

"Irini tells me you want a probe droid," Lenz said.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Alani asked that you help us."

Lenz smiled slightly. "When both Irini and Alani ask me to do something, I have no choice but to obey." He gestured at them

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to sit at a battered metal table. "I must warn you, we run some danger of being arrested. Since Roan's murder the government has been cracking down on those who run the black market. Power is slipping out of their hands, and they think a show of it will save them. The United Legislature is locked in a battle to appoint Roan's successor."

"Many Workers think the time to strike is now," Irini said. "There are those who want us to conduct another campaign of industrial sabotage to get what we want. Of course we want a Worker to be appointed as Supreme Governor, but Lenz and I are urging caution. We will lose our support among the Civilized with another sabotage campaign. It worked once, but we do not feel it will work again. We don't want civil unrest."

"Yet we are very close to it," Lenz said.

"Do you think Balog is an Absolute?" ON-Wan asked.

Lenz and Irini exchanged glances. "He was born a Worker," Irini said hesitantly. "And he was close to Ewane, the great Worker leader..."

"But yes, we think his allegiance has now changed," Lenz said grimly. "Once you told us that he had kidnapped Tahl, it all clicked into place. He has most likely been working for the Absolutes for some time. That's why he kidnapped Alani and Eritha. He had always planned to let them go – his real target was Roan."

"So he lured Roan to him through the ransom," Obi-Wan said. "Then he murdered him."

Qui-Gon remembered Balog's show of grief when they had found Roan's body. Balog was a good actor. But he'd have to be, if he'd been working with the secret organization of Absolutes all along.

"One thing puzzles me," Qui-Gon said. "Balog may be head of security, but he's no match for Tahl. Even without her lightsaber. How could he have overpowered her?"

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"The Absolutés often used a paralyzing drug," Irini said. "You remain conscious but immobilized. It is easy to administer. If she turned her back on him for a moment..."

"Is the drug dangerous?" Qui-Gon asked the question, though he dreaded the answer.

"Not with one dose," Lenz said. "Or even two. The trouble is that it wears off, and if it is reused many times – especially over a short period of time – it can result in permanent damage. Muscle deterioration is one side effect." Lenz pointed down at himself. "As you can see."

"Lenz was one of the lucky ones," Irini added quietly. "There can be permanent damage to internal organs. They completely waste away in a short period of time. There were many who..." Her voice trailed off, and she flushed.

She is telling me that Tahl could die. Underneath the table, Qui-Gon gripped his hands together. Thinking of Tahl helpless, her mind active but her body deteriorating, made him want to rip the room apart.

The vision that had beckoned him to New Apsolon came back to him now. Tahl weak, her leg muscles unable to support her. She leaned against him, her hand curling around his neck. *It is too late for me, dear friend....*

"You are hiding something from us," Qui-Gon said, gazing directly at Irini, then at Lenz. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Irini answered. "We have agreed to help you find a probe droid –"

"Yet there is something about the kidnapping that you know and we do not," Qui-Gon said, the anger escalating in his voice. "You admit that we stand the best chance of finding Tahl. Give us all the information we need, and the chances are greater still." He leaned forward. The time had come for a little intimidation. He did not like to use it, but his impatience had run its course. He needed to act, and these people could not stand in his way. "I remind you that it is never a good idea to cross the Jedi."

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Obi-Wan picked up on his urgency. "We have lost one of our own," he said. "This is a serious matter to us."

The double threat from the two Jedi seemed to rock Lenz. He swallowed. "It is not something we know. It is something we suspect."

"Lenz – "

"No, Irini. They are right. They should know." Lenz silenced her with a look, then turned his attention back to the Jedi. "We know that the Absolutes used secret informers when they were in power. There is a list of those who informed. This list is encrypted so that it cannot be copied. Only a few in the government knew of this list, even fewer have seen it, and we think most of them – maybe all of them – are dead. One of them was Roan. Roan had it, but it was stolen before he died. We know that much."

"At first we thought Balog had been able to get it from Roan," Irini said. "Now we don't think so. Someone else did."

"We think Balog is looking for it," Lenz said. "After all, his name is on it. If that was discovered, he would lose all credibility among the Workers. Our word against Balog will not be enough to turn people against him. We need proof. He needs to destroy that proof. We think his ambitions lie higher than the office of Chief Security Controller. Whoever has the list has great power. It will be his or her choice to expose the informers or keep them secret, to bribe them for silence or look like a hero for exposing them. Careers and reputations will be destroyed. The list is said to contain some prominent names."

"What does Tahl have to do with this?" Obi-Wan asked.

"The list was in Absolute hands for a short time, then disappeared," Irini said. "We know this for sure. What if Balog thinks that Tahl has the list? It's the only explanation as to why Balog would capture her and yet keep her alive."

Qui-Gon shook his head. "If Tahl had the list, we would have known it."

"So you don't think she has it?" Lenz asked.

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"Perhaps she doesn't *know* she has it," Irini guessed. "Perhaps she knows where it can be found. She just doesn't know the significance of it."

This news was disturbing. It meant that Balog could be keeping her alive only until he knew the truth. Tahl did not have that list. When he discovered that, he would kill her.

Qui-Gon saw by Obi-Wan's pale face that his Padawan had come to the same conclusion. He stood. "If your theory is right, Balog won't have much patience. Neither do I. Let's get that probe droid."

Chapter Three

Lenz and Irini led them deep into the Worker sector, near the outskirts of the city. The area had been abandoned by the Workers when better housing became available after the election of Ewane. Block after block of abandoned housing showed the effects of neglect and disorder. Half-demolished buildings stood next to intact ones whose windows were shattered or blown out completely. Rubble lay in the street, and stacks of durasteel sheeting were piled up in vacant lots.

"The government is planning to tear these down," Lenz said, gesturing at the devastated buildings. "The lawmakers can't agree on what to build instead, so the project is left half finished. But it has become a good place to hide for those who don't want to be found. Security sweeps are made frequently, so we must all be alert."

"How will we program the droid to find Balog?" Qui-Gon asked. "We don't have complete information on him. We know that vitals on Workers are stored somewhere. Who has access to them?"

"Everything you need you will be able to buy here," Lenz said.

He stopped in front of a partially demolished building and took a laser signal from his tunic. He activated the laser point and blinked it several times in a pattern against the stone front of the

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building. A concealed sensor in the wall caught the signal and, after a moment, blinked twice.

"We can enter," Lenz said.

Obi-Wan glanced at his Master. He was relieved to see that Qui-Gon seemed himself again. Most likely it was because they had taken action. He could sense the frustration inside Qui-Gon – as well as something else there, some desperation that Obi-Wan didn't understand. At least Qui-Gon was back in control. He had found the calm he needed to proceed. Later, when Tahl was safe, Obi-Wan would ask his Master why he'd had such trouble focusing. Qui-Gon would not mind the question. He knew that Obi-Wan would only ask in order to learn.

Lenz pushed open the door to the building. Obi-Wan noted that although the building appeared to be a ruin, the door was armored. The arming devices must have been released when the sensor blinked back an okay.

A staircase led upward, but Lenz turned to the side and accessed a doorway flush to the wall. A ramp led down to a lower level.

Lenz and Irini went first, and the Jedi followed. The ramp was lit with one dim glow rod attached to the wall. Obi-Wan strode down the sloping ramp, ready for anything.

A figure stepped out of the dimness. "Lenz. We haven't seen you here in a while."

"Greetings, Mota. You know I have forbidden the Workers to use illegal means to achieve our ends," Lenz said. "But my friends here need your help."

The man stepped closer. He was dressed in the unisuit that Obi-Wan had seen many Workers wear. His gray hair was tied behind him, and his body looked strong. There were two blasters tucked into his utility belt.

"You must be Jedi," he said, though Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were dressed in the garments of space travelers. "Never thought I'd see the day the Jedi would need my help."

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"We are grateful for anything you can provide us with," Qui-Gon said.

"Don't get me wrong. It will cost you. I'm in the business for one reason only. Credits. I'm the one who takes the risks. You can hitch rides around the galaxy, but my products aren't free."

"We are prepared to pay," Qui-Gon replied impatiently. "The speed of the transaction is more important than price."

"Then let's get to it."

Mota led the way down a long hallway into a large open space. Long metal tables stretched from one end of the space to the other. Isolated pieces of merchandise were laid out on the tables. There were some communication devices, some weaponry, and some pieces of tech equipment.

"As you can see, our stocks are low," Mota said.

Lenz looked at him sharply. "I'll say. Who is buying your weapons?"

Mota's return gaze was neutral. "Whoever has the credits. I don't ask questions."

"We need probe droids," Qui-Gon said.

"I only have one. Probe droids are hard to get." Mota strode to a table and picked up a droid. "It's in good shape, though. All ready for programming."

"They need the vitals of a citizen," Irini said. "Balog."

"The Chief Security Controller?" At last an emotion flickered over Mota's face: surprise.

But it smoothed out and became neutral again. "I have his stats. I can program the droid. The vitals will cost you more credits."

"They'll need swoops or landspeeders," Lenz said.

"Down below."

"Let's program the droid first," Qui-Gon said.

"Sure. Just let me see the credits." Mota named a figure, and Qui-Gon counted out the currency.

Mota pocketed the credits without counting [hem and turned to a data screen. He began to access files.

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"The vitals on every citizen were entered into the main files of the Absolutes in the old days," Irini told them in a low voice. "It is illegal to access those files now, but that doesn't stop Mota. Having exact information on Balog will help greatly in tracking."

Mota downloaded the information in the data-pad into the droid, then programmed it. The probe droid beeped and revolved.

"When would you like to release the droid?" Mota asked.

"Immediately," Qui-Gon answered tersely.

Mota accessed a shuttered window, and the probe droid flew out. Mota handed the transmitter to Qui-Gon.

"Keep this on at all times, and the probe droid will find you. If the droid is destroyed, it will tell you that, too. I've programmed the droid to make a preliminary search. If it can't pinpoint Balog in the city, it will be able to pinpoint his point of departure."

Qui-Gon nodded and hooked the transmitter onto his utility belt. "Now let's see about those speeders."

They followed another ramp down to a lower level. It was an identically sized space, this one filled with surface transport vehicles – swoops, landspeeders, gravsleds.

"Our inventory is pretty full, so you can take your pick," Mota said.

Qui-Gon quickly chose a landspeeder and a swoop. "We might need the agility for at least one of us," he told Obi-Wan. "The other will have room for Tahl." He turned to Mota. "These are guaranteed?"

"They're a few years old, but they won't let you down," Mota said. "My merchandise is the best."

"Glad to hear it," Qui-Gon said. "But we'll test them first."

Mota accessed double durasteel doors at the end of the space. "Go through that door to the backyard. You can test them there. Just watch out for security patrols overhead."

Obi-Wan slung his leg over the swoop and adjusted the seat so that he had easy access to the controls in the handlebars. He

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revved up the repulsorlift engine as Qui-Gon started his land-speeder. He followed Qui-Gon as he zoomed out the double doors. They passed into a short tunnel and then burst into the open air. They found themselves in an open yard with high security fencing surrounding it.

Obi-Wan had ridden a swoop before and was used to the extra maneuverability. He pushed the swoop, making sharp turns and accelerating rapidly. He was glad to see that the vehicle handled well. Qui-Gon also seemed satisfied, and the two of them landed the transports and turned off the engines just as Irini and Lenz appeared in the yard.

"If you find the list with Tahl, what will you do with it?" Irini asked them anxiously.

"The list is not our first concern," Qui-Gon said.

"You must realize how much power resides in that list," Lenz said. "It cannot fall into the wrong hands."

"Do you promise to come to us first if you have it?" Irini asked.

"I cannot make that promise," Qui-Gon said. "But I will promise that we will keep it safe. The Jedi will volunteer to hold the list as a neutral party until the government appoints a successor to Roan."

Irini nodded reluctantly.

Obi-Wan caught sight of a blur in the sky. "I think the probe droid is returning already."

Qui-Gon looked up, his expression tense with expectation. The probe droid settled on the ground in front of him. He quickly bent to examine the readout.

"Balog has left the city," Qui-Gon said. "He's struck out over open country."

"That's strange," Lenz said. "Why would he leave his base of support?"

"Maybe he knows the Jedi are on his trail," Irini said.

Qui-Gon programmed the droid to continue tracking and sent it off again. Then he programmed the coordinates of Balog's last

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stop into his shipboard computer. He gave Obi-Wan the coordinates, and Obi-Wan did the same on his swoop.

Mota emerged from a door concealed in the wall of the building.

"How do you like the transports?" he asked. "They're fine. We have a deal," Qui-Gon said, counting out the additional credits.

Mota placed the credits inside a pocket of his unisuit. Suddenly, the sensors on the wall began to glow. Mote watched as they beeped out a private code.

"Patrols in the vicinity," Mote said. "I suggest you leave." Without another word, he swiftly made his way back to the hidden door and disappeared.

"Don't worry, Mota, we'll be fine," Lenz muttered. "Irin, we'd better get out of here." He nodded at the Jedi. "You should take off. If the security patrol sees you with black market transports, you'll be detained, possibly even arrested."

"Thank you for your help," Obi-Wan said hastily as he mounted his swoop.

"Will you be all right?" Qui-Gon asked.

"We know this area well," Lenz assured them. "There is an exit through that fence that will bring us safely home. If I were you I'd go out the back way and stick to the alleys."

From a distance, they heard the sound of speeder engines.

"We'll be in touch," Qui-Gon told them.

The two transports lifted into the air. Qui-Gon led the way out. The narrow alley snaked out from the backyard of Mota's building, twisting and turning past the back sides of the crumbling buildings. They could hear security landspeeder engines nearby, but could not see them.

Finally, they emerged on a deserted street. Qui-Gon headed east toward the outskirts of the city. He pushed his engine to maximum and Obi-Wan followed.

With the security patrol well behind them, they reached the edge of the city and took off over open country. Obi-Wan felt

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his spirits rise as the wind blew in his face. He couldn't help but feel that Tahl was within their reach.

Chapter Four

By the time they reached the coordinates that the probe droid had given them, the droid had not returned with Balog's next position.

Qui-Gon halted his speeder, which hovered over the ground. Obi-Wan pulled up next to him. They were well outside the city in an unpopulated area. It was flat and dry, with only a few trees clumped here and there. In the far distance, they could see hills.

"We could wait here for the droid," Qui-Gon said to Obi-Wan. "Or we could track ourselves. If we're wrong, we'd have to double back. It could waste time."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Then we can't be wrong."

By the look on his Master's face, Obi-Wan knew it was the answer he'd wanted to hear.

Leaving the engines idling, the two Jedi jumped from their transports and examined the ground. Obi-Wan had been taught tracking at the Temple, but he'd also recently been on a tracking exercise with Qui-Gon on Ragoon- 6. He was glad he'd had a chance to brush up on his skills.

"The probe droid has told us that Balog is traveling in an armored hoverscout," Qui-Gon said. "We know he was last heading roughly east. If we can find some evidence of scorch marks from the engine, we can track him. A vehicle of that

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weight takes a bigger power drive. There's a predictable pattern of acceleration and release of excess exhaust."

Obi-Wan examined the ground as he'd been taught, dividing it into sections and noticing each pebble, each disturbance of sand. He crouched down to examine a rock.

"Here," he said. He moved a step on. "And here."

Qui-Gon leaned over to examine the trail. "Yes. See how deeply the rocks have been marked. He accelerated here. Let's go."

They jumped back onto their transports and took off. Every so often they stopped to examine the surrounding ground. True to the pattern, they found evidence of exhaust on the rocks and ground. They knew they were still on Balog's trail.

The suns began to slip down into the sky. Obi-Wan scanned the horizon ahead. He saw a black shape heading their way. He didn't say anything for a moment. He hoped it was the droid but wasn't certain.

Qui-Gon's gaze was slightly sharper. "Here it comes," he called, relief in his voice. He halted the speeder and Obi-Wan pulled up beside him. In just minutes, the droid returned.

Qui-Gon consulted the readout. "He's stopped. Good. We might be able to catch up to him by dawn."

Qui-Gon released the probe droid again, then zoomed off to the next destination. Obi-Wan pushed his engine to follow. Balog was within their grasp.

They rode all night. It was Obi-Wan's second night without sleep. The three moons rose high in the purple sky, and the calls of night creatures came to him faintly. When weariness overcame him, he reached out to the Force to help him maintain a meditative state. He was alert enough to drive, yet was able to allow his body to rest even as he sped over the rocky ground. Qui-Gon did not appear tired in the least.

Dawn broke quickly on this world. The horizon turned red-orange, and the blazing color spread into the dark purple of the sky as the suns rose higher. The flat landscape had changed to

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foothills that grew larger and steeper as they rode. Trees were thick, and the Jedi had to use caution to keep up their speed.

"We are close, Padawan. Let's slow down a bit. Balog could be breaking camp." Qui-Gon slowed his engine, and Obi-Wan followed suit.

"We should go on foot from here. He should be over that next hill."

Obi-Wan jumped off his swoop gratefully. His legs felt stiff. The air was cold, and he moved quickly to warm his muscles.

They climbed the hill silently. Their footing had to be assured, for if they slipped, they could cause a small rock slide that would alert Balog of their presence.

They neared the top of the hill and Qui-Gon dropped to his hands and knees. Obi-Wan did the same. He slithered up to the top and peered over.

All he saw was an empty plain. There was no sign of Balog, even in the distance. He must have left long ago.

Qui-Gon dropped his head into his hands. He did not speak for a moment. Obi-Wan was disappointed, but he could see that his Master was distraught.

Obi-Wan was tired and hungry and cold. There was nothing he would like better right now than to set up the condenser unit for warmth, eat some rations, and settle on the ground for a good sleep of at least a few hours.

Instead, he put his hand on Qui-Gon's shoulder. He spoke softly. "Let's keep going."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said, his expression fierce. "Let's move on."

Chapter Five

Before the morning had passed, the probe droid returned with new coordinates. Balog was traveling quickly, with barely any stops. Obi-Wan could see Qui-Gon's frustration harden into cold resolve. He would not rest until they caught up with Balog. He would drive his body to the limit.

The temperature rose, and the combined power of the blazing suns bore down on Obi-Wan. He took a swallow of water from his rations. He felt light-headed from the heat and lack of sleep.

"Do you think Balog doesn't stop because he knows we're behind him?" he asked Qui-Gon.

"Or he has a destination in mind and knows he will be safe there," Qui-Gon responded. "It would be best for us to catch up to him before he reaches it."

Obi-Wan wanted to ask Qui-Gon more questions, but he stilled his curiosity. He sensed that talk would disrupt his Master's concentration. They were using the probe droid, but they also needed their own tracking skills to keep moving. Time and time again they needed to exit their transports and make their way over the ground. Obi-Wan now realized how different a training exercise was from reality. He had to make absolutely sure that he didn't miss a thing, and that what he did read from the ground was correct. Tahl's life depended on it.

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As the first sun began to set, the probe droid returned. Qui-Gon consulted the readout and turned to Obi-Wan. His face was streaked with dust, his tunic stained and filthy. Obi-Wan knew he must look just the same.

"We must travel through the night again, Padawan. Can you do it?"

Obi-Wan had reached a place where his body did not feel fatigue. He knew it was there, deep in his muscles and bones, and that he would feel it once this pursuit was over. Until then, he would not allow himself.

"I can do it," he said.

Qui-Gon nodded and sped off. Again, they rode through the dark night. The cold air revived Obi-Wan and he took deep breaths of it to restore himself. The night streamed past in a blur of landscape and rising and setting moons.

The sky was just beginning to lighten when the probe droid returned. It had taken less time for its reconnaissance. That could be a good sign. Obi-Wan kept his eyes on Qui-Gon as he quickly accessed the readout. When Qui-Gon turned, his eyes gleamed in satisfaction.

"He has stopped. The droid has just left him, so he'll be there this time. We've got him." He leaped off his speeder. "We must proceed carefully, Padawan. There is a small canyon just ahead. Balog is there."

They proceeded silently toward a rocky outcropping. Qui-Gon signaled, indicating that they would find Balog around the rocks.

They moved silently but speedily. The darkness was starting to lift, but there were still deep shadows cast by the rocks and cliffs around them. They moved into the shadows of the cliff. It would give them cover.

They climbed over some rocks and entered the canyon. Ahead they saw a small fire burning. There was no sign of Balog's hoverscout, but a figure lay near the fire, wrapped in a thermal quilt. Perhaps the hoverscout was parked nearby, deep in

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the shadows. Obi-Wan focused on the figure near the fire. Was it Balog? Or could it be Tahl?

Qui-Gon's steps slowed. He peered ahead through the dimness at the figure on the ground. He put out a hand to slow Obi-Wan down.

"Something is wrong," he muttered. "Can you feel it?"

Before Obi-Wan could respond, two dark shapes in the sky swooped down toward them. Probe droids.

And then Obi-Wan saw their own probe droid dart to the left, circling the canyon. He pointed it out to Qui-Gon, who looked up at it, puzzled, just as blaster fire ripped into the rocks behind them.

"It's a trap!" Qui-Gon shouted.

Chapter Six

Balog had fooled them. He was gone, but he had left two attack droids.

One of these droids peeled off and went after the Jedi's probe droid. The other headed for the Jedi.

Their droid shifted into attack mode from the threat. Blaster fire pinged overhead as the two droids found each other's positions and battled.

"We can't lose that droid," Qui-Gon said urgently. He activated his lightsaber and jumped behind a boulder for cover. "Obi-Wan, get back to your swoop. One of us needs to fight the droids from the air."

Obi-Wan hated to leave his Master, but he saw the wisdom of Qui-Gon's strategy. He sprinted toward his swoop. He could hear blaster fire erupt behind him, and had to discipline himself not to turn and check on Qui-Gon's safety. He had to trust his Master to handle the situation until his return.

The wind whistled past his ears as he raced across the terrain. He leaped onto his swoop and pushed the engines to maximum. He zoomed back toward the canyon.

Qui-Gon had jumped or climbed to a narrow ledge above the canyon floor. As the probe droid circled and dived, peppering Qui-Gon with blaster fire, Qui-Gon used his lightsaber in a series

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of quick defensive moves. Obi-Wan knew he was biding his time until the droid came closer, so he could leap toward it with his lightsaber. It was a waiting game.

"Get that other droid!" Qui-Gon shouted.

Obi-Wan wanted to protect Qui-Gon. But Qui-Gon was right. Losing a probe droid would drastically lower the odds of finding Tahl quickly.

He shot up to where the probe droids were battling and activated his lightsaber. It was hard, even from close range, to tell which droid was theirs.

Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan's hesitation. "The one on the left, Padawan!" he called out.

Obi-Wan focused on the two droids, noting any nicks and scratches that would identify the one he needed to destroy. Balog's droid had a deep scratch on one side. Confident now, Obi-Wan moved closer, angling to take his first strike.

Balog's droid suddenly veered and dived, blasting fire at the Jedi droid. The droid took evasive action, blaster fire missing it by centimeters. Obi-Wan gunned the motor and leaned to the right, angling the swoop closer. His balance had to be perfect or the swoop would tumble end over end in midair. He made a sudden dive on top of Balog's droid, swiping with his lightsaber. But the droid had already reversed course, and he missed.

Obi-Wan righted the swoop and raced up toward the probe droid. He could not let the droid get another shot out. At the same time he had to stay out of his own droid's angle of fire.

Balog's probe droid veered again. Obi-Wan followed. There was only so much strategy a droid could have. Obi-Wan dived, anticipating the droid's move. At the same time, the Jedi droid fired at Balog's.

"To the left, Padawan!" Qui-Gon shouted.

Without looking, without thinking, Obi-Wan pulled the swoop to the left, barely missing blaster fire from his own droid. Instead of righting the swoop, he used the move to circle, then

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zoom up, coming at Balog's droid head on. He saw the red sensor blink as it computed his position. He had only seconds.

He rammed the engines into screaming full power and leaned off the swoop as far as he could, raising his lightsaber high. The lightsaber came down and cut the droid neatly in two. Sputtering and smoking, it fell to the ground below and crashed.

Obi-Wan turned the swoop again, this time heading for Balog's second droid. It had altered its flight plan to fly lower since it could not get a good reading on Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan kept to the droid's left, leaving Qui-Gon room to maneuver.

He glanced quickly at Qui-Gon, who nodded. They didn't need to compare notes; they had arrived at the same plan. Obi-Wan sent the swoop into a dive at the same time as Qui-Gon leaped. The two Jedi soared toward the droid, their lightsabers pulsating. Together, they timed their blows – Qui-Gon an upward sweep, Obi-Wan a downward thrust. The probe droid had no way to escape. It fell under both blows and disintegrated in a shower of metal and sparks.

But what Obi-Wan hadn't taken into account was their own probe droid. It had reprogrammed itself to attack the second droid, and fired at the same time.

Obi-Wan felt a warning surge in the Force and quickly accelerated. He was fast enough to avoid getting hit but not fast enough to bring the swoop completely out of danger. He heard blaster fire pepper the body of the swoop. Immediately it began to smoke and sputter. Obi-Wan carefully guided it toward the ground.

Qui-Gon landed on his feet. Obi-Wan pulled up next to him.

Qui-Gon's face was grimy and streaked with sweat as he looked impassively at the swoop.

"I'm sorry, Master," Obi-Wan said disgustedly as he jumped off the damaged swoop. "Too much of my focus was on Balog's droid."

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"It's all right," Qui-Gon said in his quietest voice. Obi-Wan knew the setback had upset him. "You did well. We still have our probe droid."

Qui-Gon bent to examine the swoop. Part of the control panel had fused together. After a moment he lifted his head. "It's worse than I thought. It will take some time to repair it. Or else we could leave it here. But then there will be no room to bring Tahl back..."

"Unless we capture Balog and his transport."

"Which we can't count on. Getting Tahl to safety is our first concern. We can't make another mistake."

Qui-Gon was still keeping his voice pitched low, but Obi-Wan could see the boiling frustration in his eyes. He wished he could replay the fight. He wished he had remembered to watch out for their own droid.

"Go on without me, Master," he said. "I'll stay and repair the swoop and catch up to you."

"No," Qui-Gon said. "I won't leave you alone in this area. Lenz told me that it is dangerous. There are Worker supporters and Absolute loyalists who often meet in violent clashes. Besides, Tahl is too vulnerable. She is trapped, and if Balog gets one second free, he could inject her again and possibly kill her. We need to do this together."

"I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said again.

Qui-Gon put a hand on his shoulder. "Enough. It is a delay. Nothing more. Get the repair kit from the speeder. We are wasting time."

Obi-Wan ran back to the landspeeder, his heart pounding. Qui-Gon had said all the right things to reassure him, but he didn't feel any better. Repairing the swoop could take several hours. If this delay meant that Tahl was moved beyond their reach, he would feel responsible.

When he returned, he found Qui-Gon bent over the figure by the smoking fire. It was just a bundle of clothes wrapped in a thermal blanket. Qui-Gon extracted a sensor.

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"This is what confused the droid," he said. "It's an infrared sensor. It thought Balog was still here. I had a feeling we would find this. It should have occurred to me earlier." Qui-Gon squinted at the empty landscape. "He knows we're following. When his probe droids fail to return, he'll know we won this battle. He will do something else to delay us. We must be on our guard."

Chapter Seven

Qui-Gon sat in the star map room at the Temple. The soft blue light surrounded him. The planet holograms swirled around him in the fantastic array of colors the galaxy provided. This was his favorite room at the Temple, yet recently he had not been drawn here. It was such a quiet place, and Qui-Gon had sought to cure his restlessness with activity rather than calm.

The door opened and Tabl entered, then stopped abruptly. Although she could not see him, she knew he was there. Once, he had asked her how she knew him immediately – was it his breathing pattern, his scent, some betrayal of movement? She had only smiled. "It is just you," she'd said.

But there was no smile today. He and Tabl had been arguing or avoiding each other for months. Whenever he returned from a mission, he would go to see her, as he always had. But their conversations did not go well. Lately, their arguments had circled around Tabl's treatment of Bant, her new Padawan. She was a kind teacher and respected Bant's unique abilities, but she often left her behind and went on short missions on her own.

"I'm sorry," she said stiffly. "You came here to be alone."

So she could tell that, too. "Stay, please," he said.

She sat close to him, tucking her knees up to her chin in a pose he hadn't seen since she was a young girl. "I'm disturbing your refuge. Well, sometimes you need disturbing, Qui-Gon."

"No doubt."

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"You know, your calmness can be infuriating," Tahl said. "But this moodiness is worse. I'm trying not to take it personally, but either you avoid me or you smother me with concern because of my blindness or you attack me about how I am with my Padawan. If you're trying to test our friendship, you're doing a very good job."

She spoke lightly, but he knew she meant it.

What could he say? She presented a good front to others. Her extraordinary compensations for her blindness had convinced everyone that she had come to terms with it. He knew the truth. He'd known her since she was a girl. Tahl was such an independent spirit. Now she disliked having to ask for help or guidance. Yet there were times she needed it.

"I'm only trying to look out for you," he said carefully. "Then when I do, you push me away."

"Why shouldn't I push you away when you crowd me? You should be used to me by now. You know I have to find my way. We all do. You've had more experience as a Master, it's true. But you also know that each Master finds a separate path with his or her Padawan."

"I do know that."

"Then why can't you let me find my own?"

The question hung between them. Qui-Gon realized he didn't know the answer. He was not one to interfere in other lives. A solitary man, he respected privacy. But with Tahl, it was different. He had a deep feeling that she needed protection, and he had been relieved when she had chosen Bant as her Padawan. But Tahl would not depend on Bant to help her, either.

Her friendship was the most important thing. He needed to back off.

"You're right," he said. "I was wrong."

"Stars and galaxies," she murmured. "I wasn't expecting an apology. I was expecting another argument."

"Well, there are things I could say –"

She smacked his knee. "I know that. How about we just be quiet, for once? We can't get into trouble that way."

So Qui-Gon sat with her, watching the hologram planets whirl. For the first time in weeks, he felt at peace. Strange how her quiet presence could soothe as well as irritate him.

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It had been their last quiet time together. The next morning, he found out she was going on a quick mission to the rough satellite planet Vandon 3. She was leaving Bant behind. By the morning meal, they were arguing again.

The delay caused by the damage to the swoop made them push themselves even harder. The new coordinates the probe droid brought back spurred them on. By the next morning they had reached the vast rock quarries of New Apsolon, where the gray stone that had been used to build the majority of the buildings in the capital city was harvested.

It was rough country, with vast boulders, cliffs, and deep pits, some filled with water. A good place to hide, Qui-Gon thought. Perhaps they were approaching Balog's destination.

Obi-Wan had been silent for hours, his face drawn. Qui-Gon knew his Padawan still felt badly about the delay. He had no more words of reassurance for him. Obi-Wan would have to look forward, like a Jedi. His Padawan knew that Qui-Gon was frantic to find Tahl, but most likely thought his zeal to find her had to do with their long friendship. He did not know how much of Qui-Gon's spirit was bound up in Tahl's safety. He could not know how full Qui-Gon's heart was, and how difficult that made it for him to speak.

All will be well, Qui-Gon told himself, when I find her. When I see her. When I know she is safe...

Qui-Gon wrenched his mind away from the future. It had been worrying him, how often his thoughts went to his reunion with Tahl. It sprang from his need to see her safe. Yet it was dangerous for him to dwell on the future, he knew. Balog was still ahead of them. That was all he needed to know. His attention must be on each present moment. His focus was distracted, and he could be missing things as he traveled. He was not thinking like a Jedi. How could he teach his Padawan when he himself had trouble reaching his calm center?

Qui-Gon drew his focus around him. His hands remained steady on the controls of the land-speeder. His progress

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continued. Yet he directed his concentration away from his piloting to take in the landscape around him, the Force vibrating, present as it was always present, teaching him as it always taught him.

Then he felt it. A flicker of something... danger, perhaps. He might have noticed it before. It might have been lurking underneath the surface of his worry for some time. It was a separate worry from his distress over Tahl. Now he examined it fully, turning it over in his mind. A ripple in the Force, an undercurrent, a warning. A different energy was behind them.

Someone was tailing them.

He did not say anything to Obi-Wan. He cast his focus back, alert for any clue. They drove on.

By dusk, he was certain. They were gaining on Balog now. The last report from the droid told them that their ability to go long periods without sleep had helped them. Balog had stopped, and stopped again. The distance was closing. This time, Qui-Gon believed it because he could feel it.

Yet the fact that someone was behind them could impede their progress. He sensed that this being was gaining on them. He or she was close now. If they were overtaken and attacked, they could lose precious time.

It was time to tell Obi-Wan.

"There is someone behind us, following us," Qui-Gon said the next time they stopped to check their position. "I think it might be better to circle back and surprise them before they surprise us. I don't like the delay, but it would be better in the long run to deal with this."

"I didn't sense anything," Obi-Wan said unhappily.

"It was a suggestion, nothing more. Very faint, but it grew. Don't dwell on your lapse, Obi-Wan. Look forward. This is a good lesson. Even in pursuit, your focus should be a wide circle, taking in everything around you."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Do you have any ideas about who it could be?"

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Qui-Gon shook his head. "I wouldn't guess." "It could be Irini," Obi-Wan said. "She seemed very anxious about that list."

"It could also be a comrade of Balog's," Qui-Gon said. "If Balog knows we're gaining on him, he might call for help. I don't want to use the probe droid to track our pursuer. We're going to have to do it ourselves."

"I'm ready," Obi-Wan agreed.

They turned back, making a wide circle to avoid being seen. Qui-Gon pointed ahead to a cluster of hill formations formed from solid rock. He gestured that they should go around them. He remembered that they had gone through the formation in the center, where a rough passage was cut through the rock. He had a feeling their pursuer was inside that narrow passage. It was a good place for them to ambush whoever it was.

They zoomed around the formation, then headed into the passage, moving at top speed now. Ahead, Qui-Gon saw the reverberations of a fast-moving landspeeder. He motioned to Obi-Wan, and Obi-Wan guided his repaired swoop high in the air. Qui-Gon pushed the engines faster as Obi-Wan zoomed above. Within seconds, they were on top of the other transport.

Their pursuer looked back in surprise. A gold braid whipped around in the wind, slapping her in the cheek.

It was one of the twins – at this speed, Qui-Gon couldn't tell which one.

The twin stopped her landspeeder and leaped off. Qui-Gon slowed his own engine. Obi-Wan landed the swoop. As she strode toward them, he saw it was Eritha. He was surprised. Alani had been the more forceful of the twins. Eritha tended to stay in the background. Why had she come on this rugged journey?

"I'm so glad to find you!" she cried. "I've been traveling for days. I didn't know how to reach you. I found out who is backing Balog. I know who your enemy is."

"Who?" Qui-Gon asked.

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Eritha hesitated a moment. Her lips pressed together in a thin line, as if she were reluctant to let the words out. "My sister," she said.

Chapter Eight

"Alani is in contact with Balog," Eritha continued. The words now tumbled out of her. "I heard her speaking to him on a comlink. I couldn't tell where he was, or where he was headed. Tahl is alive, but he's keeping her contained in that horrible device."

Tahl is alive. Obi-Wan saw the relief transform Qui-Gon's face before his Master turned his full attention back to Eritha again.

"Do you see what this means?" Eritha cried. She twisted her hands together. "Alani must have lied to me all along! She convinced me that Roan was behind our father's death. And I'm sure that she engineered our own kidnapping." She went on angrily. "No wonder she was so strong during the ordeal. After we were released, I was afraid they were tracking us to kill us. She kept telling me not to be afraid, not to worry...." Eritha's voice was full of disgust. "I thought she was so brave. And Roan – could she have arranged to kill Roan? I can't believe that! He was so kind to us. He was our father's best friend!"

"What is her goal?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Power. She wants to rule New Apsolon." Eritha shook her head. "At least that's what I think they are planning. Balog will back her along with the Absolutes. I can't believe what I'm saying. I can't believe I never knew my sister. I'm so ashamed."

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"But you didn't do anything wrong," Obi-Wan said.

"Don't you understand? She is part of me. I should have known." Eritha's gaze was bleak.

"Are you sure she gave no clues to Balog's whereabouts?" Qui-Gon asked urgently.

Eritha sighed woefully. "I'm sorry. I overheard the conversation, but they never mentioned where he was."

"Thank you for coming and telling us this," Qui-Gon said. "You risked much. Now you must return."

"I'm not going back." Eritha's jaw set stubbornly, removing the softness that distinguished her from her more dynamic and electric sister.

"I am sorry," Qui-Gon said firmly, "but you must. Obi-Wan and I are going ahead. It will be dangerous."

"I don't care. My sister has shamed my planet. I must restore my family's honor. She is a Worker and has betrayed the Workers by making an alliance with the Absolutes. Do you see what this means? She thinks that because of who her father is, the Workers will accept her without question. Even as we speak she is maneuvering to get the United Legislature to appoint her as Supreme Governor. I know how she is doing it, too – I know her. She won't ask, she won't suggest. She'll be sweet and modest. Somehow those high up in the Legislature will think they came up with the idea on their own. Just as she once made me believe that Roan was involved in Ewane's death. Of course the Workers will support her – she is a heroine, for surviving our father's death.

"Once appointed, she will bring back the Absolutes and slowly restore the government to what it was. The Workers will be trampled. No." Eritha crossed her arms. "I will not return. My dead father is at my shoulder. He sacrificed too much. I am coming with you."

"Eritha, we think Balog is probably heading to his supporters. You are not trained for battle," Obi-Wan said.

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"Oh, but I am." Eritha drew back her cloak, exposing the blasters and explosive devices on her belt. "I have excellent aim."

"I admire your dedication," Qui-Gon said. "However – "

"Tahl was a great friend to me when I needed one," Eritha said, staring Qui-Gon down. "I can't desert her now. And you forget that I have been through the same thing. I was trapped in that device. I know what it does to you. I have to do this, Qui-Gon."

Qui-Gon was about to speak, but suddenly an explosion shattered the rocks at their side. Shards flew out at them. Both Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon sprang forward to protect Eritha. Qui-Gon shielded her with his body while they leaped behind her speeder.

"Keep your head down," Qui-Gon ordered sternly. "It looks as though our battle has found us."

Chapter Nine

It wasn't Balog who was attacking. After the dust cleared, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan caught a glimpse of a group of beings who blended in with the rocks and dirt. They wore gray unisuits and their skin was the same ashy color. They moved from boulder to boulder, trying to close in on the Jedi.

Obi-Wan saw a thin beam of light pulse over their heads toward the canyon wall. "Move back!" he shouted to Qui-Gon and Eritha.

They jumped back just seconds before a slide of rock and shale landed where they had been.

"They're using a beamdrill to create rock slides," Obi-Wan said.

Qui-Gon looked behind them. "They most likely are driving us into an ambush."

"What should we do?" Eritha asked. Her face was taut, her eyes wide with fear.

Another pulse hit the rock face, and the three jumped back in time to avoid another shuddering explosion of rock. The shards flew toward them, and they covered their heads until the dust settled.

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"We need to get above the range of the beamdrill," Qui-Gon said, scanning the canyon wall. "If we can get on top of the rock, they can't follow us."

"Our cable launchers don't go that high," Obi-Wan said. "We'll have to keep relaunching."

"And meanwhile they'll still be using that beamdrill," Eritha said.

"I think it's our only chance," Qui-Gon decided. "Stay close," he warned Eritha.

She shuddered. "Don't worry."

"Qui-Gon! Our probe droid is approaching!" Obi-Wan called.

"We need better cover!" Eritha shouted, panicked. She darted forward suddenly as the beam-drill pulse hit an area over their heads.

As rocks began to rain down, Qui-Gon leaped toward Eritha to bring her to safety. Obi-Wan followed, activating his lightsaber to deflect the rocks from the probe droid.

Qui-Gon grabbed Eritha and landed safely behind a pile of debris. Obi-Wan wasn't as lucky. He was seconds too late to save the probe droid. A large boulder hit the droid straight on, shattering it. Obi-Wan barely had time to register this before he realized a shower of rocks was headed toward him. He twisted in midair, but a large rock caught him in the leg. He fell, and his leg gave way underneath him.

"Stay here!" Qui-Con roared to Eritha, pushing her head down. He raced forward, picked Obi-Wan up in his arms, and with a mighty leap, landed beyond the safety of the new pile of rocks the attack had created.

"Master... the droid I'm sorry..." Obi-Wan's breath came in gasps. His leg throbbed.

Qui-Gon felt the leg gently. "It's not broken. After you catch your breath you might be able to stand on it. If not, I'll carry you."

Obi-Wan nodded. He gathered himself to accept the pain, to open himself to the Force so he could begin to heal.

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They were almost at the end of the narrow canyon. Obi-Wan knew he would not be able to use his cable launcher to get above the beam-drills. By the grim look on Qui-Gon's face, he knew his Master had already realized this and was formulating another plan.

Suddenly two explosions went off farther down the narrow passage, and a rock slide began, larger than the ones before. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan covered their heads.

When they were able to see through the choking dust, the end of the canyon was blocked off by a towering pile of rock and rubble.

"We're trapped," Obi-Wan said.

Qui-Gon activated his lightsaber. "They still have to come and get us. And we have the cover of the landslides they've already created."

They heard a grinding noise, and a mole miner appeared at the other end of the canyon. The utility vehicle lumbered toward them slowly.

"Mole miners can bore through solid rock," Obi-Wan said. "Our cover is about to disintegrate."

Just then Eritha dashed over to them from behind her own cover. "What is that?" she asked Qui-Gon.

"A mole miner," Qui-Gon said. "It's a utility craft used by miners."

"So our attackers are miners?" Eritha asked.

"I'd say yes," Qui-Gon said. "So far they've used mining equipment to attack us. Maybe they don't have conventional weapons."

"That could be good news," Eritha muttered.

Suddenly, she scrambled over the rock pile.

"Eritha!" Qui-Gon yelled, reaching for her.

She jumped from the top of the pile to the ground. Then she threw back the hood of her cloak and raised her hands.

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"Stay here, Padawan." Qui-Gon leaped over the rock pile in one fluid motion. He stood with his lightsaber activated, ready to defend Eritha.

"Put away your weapon, Qui-Gon," Eritha said through her teeth. "And trust me."

The mole miner advanced a few meters, then stopped.

Slowly, Qui-Gon deactivated his lightsaber. Obi-Wan watched, knowing his Master could still attack in a movement faster than the eye could see.

Slowly, a hatch opened at the top of the mole miner. A ramp emerged. A man and a woman crawled out and walked down the ramp.

They faced Qui-Gon and Eritha and bowed.

"Daughter of Ewane, we are at your service," the man said. Obi-Wan now saw that their skin was gray with rock dust.

Eritha bowed in return. "I am Eritha."

The tall woman spoke. "We thought you were a team from the Absolutes. We apologize. They have been raiding our settlements and stealing supplies."

"Who are you?" Qui-Gon asked.

"We are the Rock Workers. We are allies of the Tech Workers in the city. We are glad to see that you were not harmed."

"But we were," Qui-Gon said. "My Padawan is hurt. And our probe droid was destroyed. It was tracking an Absolute."

"Then we are truly sorry," the man said, distressed. "If you come with us to our settlement, we have excellent med care. We will help you any way we can."

Chapter Ten

The air was so crisp and clear on Ragoon-6 that it gave you the feeling you could see to the future, or back to the past. Tabl had proposed the training exercise to Qui-Gon on one of their rare meetings at the Temple. If they did not take the time now, when would they? she had pointed out, her chin thrusting at him as it did when she wanted her own way. Soon they would both be sent on missions again.

He knew that she had proposed the trip because of what had happened with Xanatos. His Padawan had turned to the dark side, and weeks of meditation and talks with Yoda had not reconciled Qui-Gon to that. He sensed that Yoda was concerned about his progress. Yet he was stuck, thinking over and over about everything he had done and everything he should have done.

To his relief, Tabl hadn't brought up Xanatos once on Ragoon-6. Instead they had concentrated on the exercise. The landscape of Ragoon-6 was breathtaking, but it was difficult terrain. They pushed their bodies to the limit as they scaled mountains and hiked rocky trails.

They paused to rest on a flat rock overlooking a deep valley.

"Do you see that flying irid?" Tabl said, pointing. "Look at the yellow on the underside of its wings."

Qui-Gon looked where she pointed. Tabl could always see farther than he could. He waited until his eyes could track the bird, a flash of brilliant color in the blue sky. "Beautiful."

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"Yes. But they are horrible birds. They attack their own kind. It's strange, though. They nurture their young with great care. They teach them to fly, to hunt, to nest. Yet when their young reach maturity they are just as likely to eat their parents as each other."

Qui-Gon stared out at the valley. "Are parables supposed to make me feel better? I know you are talking about Xanatos. I nurtured him and he betrayed me. It was not my fault. It was his nature. Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm talking about irids," Tahl said composedly. "But now that you brought him up

"Excuse me, I didn't – "

"I'd like to make one point. You can't control everything you touch, Qui-Gon. And you can't make sense of everything, either, no matter how much you analyze or meditate. Not even you."

"This is not about ego," he said.

She shot him a keen look, all emerald and gold. "Isn't it?"

Another delay. Qui-Gon wanted to bellow his rage to the sky. Instead, he helped his Padawan to Eritha's Landspeeder and gently lowered him into the seat. Obi-Wan's face was drawn with pain.

The last thing he wanted to do right now was take a detour from their quest, but his Padawan needed care.

Eritha drove her landspeeder, and a Rock Worker took Obi-Wan's swoop. Qui-Gon followed as they raced through the canyons toward the Rock Workers' settlement.

He was glad that the distance wasn't far. The settlement lay in a small valley surrounded by quarries. Walkways made of slate were laid out in rows and led to residences, stores, a school, and a small med unit.

Obi-Wan was met by a young woman who hurried out immediately to look at his wound.

"I am a trained medic," she said. "My name is Yanci. I've seen many wounds such as this in the quarries. This isn't too bad. Your friend will mend quickly."

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Qui-Gon nodded his thanks. Together he and Yanci helped Obi-Wan into the med center.

"I can take over from here," Yanci told him, setting out a splint and beginning the procedure for a bacta bath. "The refreshment unit is across the walkway. Why don't you rest, and I will come over and give you a progress report?"

Obi-Wan flashed Qui-Gon a grin that was also a grimace. "I'm fine here."

Qui-Gon patted his shoulder in support, then left the med unit. It might be helpful to talk to the Rock Workers about the Absolutes. He was surprised to hear that the Absolutes had been conducting raids. That meant their numbers were bigger than he'd thought. That was most likely not good news for his mission. He felt frustration rise up and threaten to choke him. He took a deep breath to calm himself. The frustration eased, but he knew it still simmered, ready to boil again. He wanted to continue tracking, but he couldn't leave Obi-Wan without knowing the extent of his injury.

Qui-Gon walked across to the refreshment unit. There he found the two Rock Workers who had been inside the mole miner. They had brought tea and food to Eritha. Qui-Gon shook his head at their offer as he took a seat opposite them.

The tall female pointed to her companion. "I am Bini, and this is Kevta," she said. "Again, we must tell you how sorry we are to have mistaken you for Absolutes. We don't get travelers out in this area, so we jumped to conclusions too fast. How is your young friend?"

"It was an understandable mistake," Qui-Gon said. "Obi-Wan will be fine, according to your medic. She'll give me a report soon."

"Yanci has great skill. It is good that you brought him here."

"Tell me," Qui-Gon said. "You said that the Absolutes had raided your camp. How many were there?"

Kevta stirred honey into his tea. "We were attacked by a squad of maybe thirty, but when there are casualties, more take

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their place. We have no way of knowing. We are forty here, but that includes elders and children. The Absolutes are also heavily armed. In the first raid, they captured our small weapons – blasters and flechette missiles."

"You don't know where their headquarters are?" he pressed.

Bini cupped her mug of tea in her hands. Qui-Gon noted that her hands were large and looked extraordinarily strong. One finger was black and blue, and there were old scars on her knuckles. Her hands told him how hard the work conditions were at the quarries better than words could.

"We do not know," she said quietly. "We have searched. If they have a base, it is well hidden."

Qui-Gon felt his irritation rise. There was so little information to be had. He couldn't get over the feeling that he was wasting time. "Is it possible that they conduct their raids from the city?"

Kevta shook his head. "No. We know their base is in the quarries somewhere. Their raids are spaced too close. Especially lately. We have been raided five times in the past month."

"Do you have weapons left?" Qui-Gon asked.

"We have a few blasters, not many," Kevta said. "We only have our tools and the explosives we use in the quarries. They are expensive and we don't like to use them. But we are getting desperate. That is why we attacked you today. We have had enough. We know they are after our large explosives. If we lose those, we're doomed. This mining outfit is a cooperative. We all share in the work and profits. If we lose our tools and explosives, we won't be able to buy more."

"You need help," Eritha said. "Have you informed the United Legislature? They could send a security force to protect you."

"We informed them weeks ago and have heard nothing," Bini said. "The troubles in the capital city have overshadowed ours."

Qui-Gon thought over what Bini and Kevta had told him. He remembered back to Mota, the black market seller with the empty tables where weapons had once been for sale. The Absolutes were gathering weapons on a large scale. They were

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ready to make their move. All of this had coincided with Tahl's kidnapping. But was there a connection?

Restlessly, Qui-Gon drummed his fingers on the table, then stilled them. Eritha watched him over the rim of her mug.

The door opened, and Yanci strode in. She saw Qui-Gon immediately and came over.

"Obi-Wan is a good patient," she said, "only stubborn. He wants to leave. But I am prevailing on you to reason with him. His wound will heal, but he needs time for the bacta to regenerate what he lost."

"How long?" Qui-Gon asked.

"A day. Maybe more. He will risk permanent damage if he does not stay off that leg."

Qui-Gon nodded. Accepting the diagnosis was not easy. Every part of him was screaming to leave, to rescue Tahl. He should at least wait until morning before making a decision. He wanted to leave tonight. Right now.

Yanci seemed to understand. "The moons are waning. It would be difficult to track tonight. The quarries are treacherous."

"Do you have a probe droid you can lend us?"

Bini shook her head. "Probe droids are illegal. Absolutes still use them, of course. We do not."

Qui-Gon saw he had no choice. Reluctantly, he rose. "May I sleep in the med unit tonight? I don't want Obi-Wan to be alone."

"I'll make arrangements," Yanci promised. "And Eritha can sleep in my unit," Bini said. "It is only one more day," Yanci said.

But one more day could mean everything. He could not risk Obi-Wan's health. Qui-Gon pushed his decision off until morning. If Obi-Wan was not better, he would consider going on alone and leave Eritha here with him. It was not a choice he wanted to make.

And when the chase began again, he would not have the probe droid. He would have to track Balog on his own. It would take longer. He might not succeed.

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Tahl felt farther away than ever.

Be strong, Tahl. You pledged your life to me. I gave you my heart. Know that I will find you.

Chapter Eleven

Now that Qui-Gon had just become a Jedi Knight, Yoda had suggested it was time he took a Padawan. Qui-Gon decided to go on one last mission while he thought about it. He never did anything rashly. He had a Padawan in mind, and it was easier to consider him away from the Temple.

He had a stopover in Zekulae while he waited for transport. It was a barren world, noted for its mineral soil, which was dark and rich and studded with blue crystals. The soil was so fine that within days it was everywhere – in his hair, in his mouth, in his boots. Qui-Gon found that his careful thoughts about his future had shrunk to a longing for his next shower.

He stopped in a café for a cool drink. He sipped it, eyeing the locals. Zekulae was not overly dangerous, but you had to be careful here. The government had a relaxed attitude toward rules and laws. Disputes were most often settled with fists or blasters.

Suddenly an argument broke out behind him. It was between two beings playing sabacc. One was a native of Zekulae, the other hidden by a column. The Zeku stood, scattering the cards.

"Strange that you're the one so upset, when I'm the one who's been cheated," a dry voice said.

Qui-Gon knew the voice, even though it had changed. He hadn't heard it in years. It was deeper, huskier than he remembered.

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Tabl rose from the table. He waited, watching her, as did everyone in the café. She commanded attention. He didn't know her mission here. It might not be safe if she were seen talking to a Jedi. She was wearing a traveler's cloak and boots, and her lightsaber was hidden.

The Zeku moved his hand toward his belt, but he didn't get a chance to draw his weapon. Within the space of an eye blink, Tabl reached out and disarmed him, at the same time pressing one shoulder so that he was forced to sit back down in his chair, hard. Maintaining the pressure, she scooped some credits off the table.

"Let's call it even," she said. "And I'll buy you a drink. Wouldn't you rather live to see the sunset?"

He nodded, his face contorted in pain. She called to the bartender. "Something special for my friend here."

She tucked the credits inside her tunic, released the Zeku, and walked on. Nobody in the café moved. No one spoke. They all watched the woman who combined elegance and danger walk casually through them.

Qui-Gon watched her, too, admiring her toughness and grace. He was astonished at how lovely she was. Her extraordinary eyes and the strength of her features had become dramatic and striking with maturity.

Then she saw him, and her face lost its severe cast. She came over to his table and sat as conversations started up around them. The incident was over.

"Well, it's you," she said. "It's been so long."

"Too long."

"I only have a minute," she said. "I'm on a mission."

Only a minute, when they hadn't seen each other in years!

"So tell me everything as fast as you can," she said, laughing. "You look well. I hear you are now a Knight."

"As are you," Qui-Gon said. "I'm thinking of taking a Padawan. Yoda is urging me to consider it."

"Do you have a candidate?"

"Xanatos."

She nodded slowly. "He is gifted. I would consider carefully, however. I'm not sure he's the right one for you."

"I haven't seen you in years, and you're giving me advice?" he teased.

Jude Watson

"Who else in the galaxy understands you so well?" she answered, smiling.

"No one," he admitted. "You were wrong about that. Remember what you said when we said good-bye?"

Her smile grew soft. "I am glad," she said, "to have been wrong about that. I'm glad to still be the one who knows you best. And we never said good-bye. Remember?"

They sat for a moment in silence, remembering the Temple, the days when they had looked forward so eagerly to becoming Jedi Knights. They hadn't known then how hard it would turn out to be. Neither had they known how deeply satisfying it would be at the same time. Yes, a life of service suited him. Suited Tabl, he could see. And it was something, to have this connection now, still so strong after so many years.

"I have to go," she said softly. "I will see you soon. Missions can be short, you know."

He smiled, remembering the eager, young Tabl who had said that so confidently years ago.

She stood. She did not say good-bye. He knew she wouldn't, no more than she ever said hello. With a last smile, she walked out of the caf© and did not look back.

Dusk fell quickly. Qui-Gon checked on Obi-Wan and found him in deep meditation. He quietly went out again, glad to see it. Obi-Wan was focusing his mind on healing. Maybe his Padawan would be ready to travel by morning. He had no doubts as to Yanci's diagnostic abilities, but she had never treated a Jedi before.

Qui-Gon strolled through the Rock Workers' settlement, taking deep breaths of the cool night air. He was impressed with its design and organization. He could see that though the quarry work was difficult, the Workers themselves had created a good life. They took care of each other and their young. Under other circumstances, he would have enjoyed the brief stop. Now he only wanted to be gone.

He found Yanci, Bini, and Kevta sitting outside a small housing unit, and they waved him over.

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"We were enjoying the stars," Kevta said. "It is a hard life out here, but I tried city work. It didn't take."

"I'm glad to have run into you," Qui-Gon said, settling himself beside them. "Would you mind if I asked you more questions about the raids? It might help us track the Absolutes."

"We will tell you what we can," Kevta said.

"I think I'll make sure Eritha is settled," Yanci said, rising. "Bini and Kevta are the strategists here." Qui-Gon noted how her hand lingered on Kevta's shoulder. He gave her a gentle smile as she left.

Qui-Gon questioned Bini and Kevta closely. By listening to the details, he was able to find a pattern in the direction of the attacks and the minimal amount of tracking the Rock Workers had done.

He left the two of them and walked slowly back to the med unit. Without knowing it, Bini and Kevta had given him good news. The Jedi did not have to return to their last coordinates. They could track Balog from a point a few kilometers from the Worker settlement. If Balog was heading to the Absolute camp, they should find some evidence of his route. There were only a few possible routes through the canyons.

Of course, it all depended on whether Balog was heading for the secret hideout of the Absolutes.

It was a chance they had to take.

Qui-Gon checked on Obi-Wan, who was now sleeping deeply. Good. Qui-Gon needed to do the same. It had been days since his last sleep. He quieted his mind, allowing sleep to come. He knew he had to operate at his peak, and his body told him that he needed rest.

He slept, but his dreams were vivid and disturbing. Once again he was in the caf© on Zekulae. His heart lifted at the sound of Tahl's voice. He rushed forward to greet her. But her gaze was lifeless, her eyes a dull black color. He realized she could not move or speak.

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He woke with a start, his heart pounding. It was still dark, but dawn was near. He immediately swung his legs over his sleep couch and went to check on Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan seemed to feel his gaze. His eyes opened slowly, and then he came awake at once.

He tested his leg muscles, stretching beneath the thermal blanket.

"Better," he said.

He swung his legs over his sleep couch. "Take it easy," Qui-Gon said. "Yanci thinks you need one more day."

Obi-Wan slid out of bed, holding one hand against the wall to steady himself. He walked around the room. "Much better," he said. "I am ready to travel."

Qui-Gon studied his Padawan to make sure he was telling the truth. He knew Obi-Wan's desire to move on would be greater than his concern for himself. But his color was good, and there was no sign of pain on his face. His gait was a bit stiff, but it was steady.

"We'll see what Yanci says," he said.

When Yanci arrived, bringing Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon's breakfast, she was startled at Obi-Wan's recovery.

"I guess I'm better than even I thought," she said cheerfully. "I see no reason why you can't travel, Obi-Wan. Just try to rest the leg when you can, and apply bacta again tonight."

Qui-Gon left Obi-Wan finishing breakfast while Yanci added some items to his medpac. The suns were just a suggestion of orange along the horizon as Qui-Gon hurried to the speeders. They would need to be refueled before they took off. Every moment counted. And he should awaken Eritha. Part of him wanted to let her sleep so that they could leave her behind. He knew she would insist on coming with them, and he worried about her safety. Tahl was his first concern. Protecting Eritha would be a distraction he didn't need. But if he did not wake her, undoubtedly she would try to find them, and she could get into more trouble that way.

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To his surprise, he found Eritha at the pen where their transports were kept.

"You're up early," he said.

She jumped. "You startled me."

"Obi-Wan is better."

She nodded. "I thought he would be. I came to start the refueling. I didn't want you to leave without me."

"I thought about it," Qui-Gon said. "Then I thought about how stubborn you are."

"It's a family trait." Eritha hesitated. "Tahl is important to me, Qui-Gon. I'd do anything for her. I promise I won't slow you down."

"I'll hold you to that," he said.

They completed the refueling in companionable silence, and Obi-Wan joined them. The stars had faded but the sky was still gray as they bid good-bye to Bini, Kevta, and Yanci.

Qui-Gon thanked them for their courtesy, but his mind was already on the day ahead. The tracking would not be easy.

"We wish you luck on your quest," Bini said. "Don't push yourself with that leg," Yanci told Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan thanked her and swung his leg a bit awkwardly over the saddle of his swoop. Eritha fired up her engines, and Qui-Gon took the lead.

With a last wave, they headed out of the settlement.

Qui-Gon went to the coordinates where the Rock Workers had lost the Absolute attack team the last time they pursued them.

"We need to find an indication that Balog headed this way as well," he told Obi-Wan. "The Rock Workers think the Absolutes took the west route through the canyons. Balog would have to change direction here."

"I don't understand," Eritha said. "The ground is sheer rock. How can you see anything?"

But the ground wasn't sheer rock, not to a Jedi. Obi-Wan left his swoop and began to search in ever-widening circles with Qui-

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Gon. Qui-Gon could see that his Padawan's leg was troubling him, but he focused on the task.

Obi-Wan found the first clue. At first it appeared to be a mere discoloration on rock. But further study told them it was the mark of Balog's high-speed engine. They recognized it now.

Qui-Gon crouched over the markings on the rock. "Good work, Padawan. Balog is heading west. Look at the pattern of the exhaust. That way." Qui-Gon pointed to the crags in the distance. Beyond the crags, he would find her. He could feel it. Her presence suddenly pulsed inside him like a heartbeat.

Eritha watched them, mystified and impressed.

"Remind me never to hide from the two of you," she said.

They set off again. Without the help of the probe droid, it was slow going. They were forced to dismount time after time to check their progress. By midday, they had found the campsite where Balog had spent the night.

"He left this morning," Qui-Gon said quietly, studying the flat rock where Balog had placed his condenser unit for heat. He could see a scorch mark and some boot marks in the surrounding dirt. "We are close." His gaze was fierce when he lifted his head. He looked past Obi-Wan toward the rugged landscape. "Very close."

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon heard the noise of the transport at the same time. They both turned toward the source of the sound.

"What is it?" Eritha asked.

The speck in the distance grew rapidly and turned into Yanci, her auburn hair flying in the wind as she piloted a swoop at maximum speed toward them.

"Something's wrong," Obi-Wan said.

Yanci pulled up so rapidly she almost tipped the swoop. She hovered next to them.

"We need you," she gasped, out of breath. "A raid... a massive raid... like nothing we've seen –"

She bent over, trying to catch her breath. "This time they are trying to destroy the entire camp," she said after a moment.

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"They are killing as many of us as they can. Using small explosives and blasters. We have rallied who we can and have made a last stand in an outbuilding. We have some weapons. Not many."

Eritha put her hands to her cheeks. "This is terrible. We must do something."

"Of course we will come," Obi-Wan said.

"Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "May I speak with you." He turned to Yanci. "Just one moment, no more."

Obi-Wan dismounted from his swoop and went to join Qui-Gon a short distance away where they could not be overheard.

"You must return with Yanci," Qui-Gon told him. "I will go on. We are too close to Tahl to turn back."

Obi-Wan stared at him, astonished. Qui-Gon understood how he felt. The Rock Workers were in desperate need of help. The Jedi were asked to give it. He could not believe that Qui-Gon would turn away like this. But how could he return when he felt Tahl's presence, when he knew she was only hours away?

"It's hard to leave our pursuit of Tahl," Obi-Wan said. "But the Rock Workers need us, Qui-Gon."

"They need Jedi help, it is true," Qui-Gon said. He put his hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. "You can provide this. But our first mission is to save Tahl."

"Our first mission always is to save lives and promote justice," Obi-Wan said, incredulous. "The Rock Workers need both of us, Qui-Gon."

"I am going forward," Qui-Gon said. His gaze was as flinty as the rocks surrounding them. "I cannot turn back now." Tahl was close. He could feel her. And he could feel that she was slipping away from him.

"What about Eritha?" Obi-Wan asked, lowering his voice. "If she returns with me, we will be putting her in danger. And if she goes on with you, she will not have the full protection she needs."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan was right. Qui-Gon struggled with the dilemma for a moment. "She will go with you," he said. "But before you reach the Rock Workers' camp, you must leave her in a safe place. You must do this, Obi-Wan. She has no place in that battle. I will come when I can."

"Master," Obi-Wan said, his eyes locking on Qui-Gon's, "this is wrong. You know it is. Tahl would say the same. How can you turn your back on these people?"

"Our mission is too important," Qui-Gon said.

"And Tahl..." His voice died away, and his hand dropped from Obi-Wan's shoulder.

They stood not speaking for a moment. Qui-Gon felt the gulf between them. His Padawan was filled with doubt and confusion. But he couldn't explain, not here, not now. He would have to go back to the vision he had on Coruscant, how every event since they'd arrived on New Apsolon had confirmed his dread. And he would have to tell Obi-Wan how he felt about Tahl. That was a conversation for another time.

His Padawan looked so confused that he relented. "Obi-Wan, I cannot abandon her," he said, his voice low. His gaze pleaded with Obi-Wan to understand.

But he got no such understanding. Obi-Wan shook his head. "You're wrong."

The flat words took him aback. It had been years since Obi-Wan had contradicted him so boldly. Qui-Gon flushed with an emotion he wasn't sure of himself.

He turned away without another word and headed to his landspeeder.

Chapter Twelve

With a grace surprising for a large man, Qui-Gon quickly sprang into the pilot seat, reversed the engines to turn the craft, and zoomed off.

Eritha ran toward Obi-Wan. "Qui-Gon isn't coming with us?"

"He has gone on with our mission," Obi-Wan said. "We will return with Yanci. But you will remain hidden outside the Rock Worker camp. You will not get involved in this battle."

He spoke the words automatically, his eyes on Qui-Gon's transport as it dwindled in the distance. He wondered if Qui-Gon had formulated a plan of attack for when they caught up to Balog. He assumed so. Yet Qui-Gon seemed so driven, so caught up in finding Balog, it did not seem he had time to formulate a strategy. Obi-Wan had wanted to ask, but did not want to insult his Master. Usually, Qui-Gon found his own time to inform Obi-Wan what he was thinking.

But Qui-Gon had not found that time. Obi-Wan was just as confused as when they'd started. Now Qui-Gon was violating Jedi principles by ignoring a cry for help.

He had spoken bluntly to his Master, but he did not regret his words. He was right. It was Qui-Gon's duty as a Jedi to turn away from what he wanted in order to help those who needed him.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan had felt this way once before, long ago, on the planet of Melida/Daan. There he had begged Qui-Gon to stay and help the Young. They were being massacred by their own leaders and parents. That day, Qui-Gon had refused to help in the same way. And Tahl had been the reason then, too.

Something in Obi-Wan's face prevented the argument that rose to Eritha's lips. Instead, she pressed them together and nodded. "I'll do what you say."

Relieved that he had won that battle, at least, Obi-Wan signaled to Yanci.

"Qui-Gon has to go on, but I am coming with you," he told her. "We need to find a place close to the camp to conceal Eritha."

"I know a place," Yanci said, nodding. She swung a leg over her swoop and waited for Obi-Wan and Eritha to mount their vehicles. Then, taking the lead, she sped off.

Obi-Wan felt his muscles tense, and his leg suddenly throbbed in protest. He had to struggle for the Jedi calm that was necessary before battle. He and Qui-Gon did not usually argue. Since their rupture when he had left the Jedi order, they had learned to honor each other's moods and inclinations. Even when they disagreed, they had found harmony. One of them stepped back and let the other make the decision. Usually it was Obi-Wan who let Qui-Gon lead, as a Padawan should. But as he grew older, his Master often let Obi-Wan choose, just as he had allowed Obi-Wan to choose a path back on Ragoon-6 during their tracking exercise. They never separated in anger after a disagreement.

Obi-Wan was startled at how disappointed and angry he still felt about Qui-Gon's decision. The wind was cooling his hot cheeks, but not his disquiet.

Would this disagreement shake their union? He didn't know. He had felt distance between them since they arrived on New Apsolon. Perhaps this would deepen it.

He couldn't worry about it. He had spoken the truth. But the distance he felt from his Master saddened him.

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Obi-Wan turned his mind away from the disagreement and used the time to focus. He would need a sure connection to the Force. His wound would slow him down somewhat, and Qui-Gon would not be there to cover him. He would have to rely on strategy more than speed.

They were approaching the Rock Worker settlement when Yanci signaled them. She turned the swoop away and led them toward a split in a sheer wall. Eritha's landspeeder cleared the opening with just centimeters to spare.

"They won't find her here," Yanci said. "I doubt they'd be looking for strays. We think their object was to steal our most advanced explosives."

"I will contact you when the situation is safe," Obi-Wan told Eritha.

She looked reluctant, but she nodded.

Suddenly, he felt a surge in the Force. He whipped his head around and saw nothing.

Yanci zoomed out of the crack in the canyon wall, and he followed. He quickly scanned the horizon and saw Qui-Gon's landspeeder in the distance, gaining fast.

Obi-Wan signaled to Yanci, then headed out to meet Qui-Gon. When he caught up to the landspeeder, he hovered by Qui-Gon's side.

Qui-Gon looked at him directly. His face showed the signs of a great internal struggle. "I was wrong, Padawan. Thank you for pointing it out to me. My duty lies here. No matter," he said with difficulty, "what it may cost."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I'm glad you came back."

Gunning their motors, they caught up to Yanci.

"I'm taking you around a back way," she told them. "When I left, we had managed to hold our position surrounding the unit where we keep the supplies and explosives."

Jude Watson

They didn't need the caution. They took a roundabout way, skirting the settlement. Yanci slowed her speeder as they approached a road cut through a narrow canyon.

Obi-Wan listened for the sounds of battle, but heard nothing except the wind. The quiet was eerie. He glanced over at Qui-Gon and saw his Master frown.

Something lay in the road ahead. Obi-Wan didn't need to come closer to know what it was. The deep disturbance in the Force told him everything.

Yanci slowed to a crawl, almost stalling her swoop. "It's a body," she said shakily.

Suddenly, she gunned the engine and zoomed ahead. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon speeded up to catch her.

Yanci was off her swoop before it had stopped. It kept going and crashed, but she didn't react. She raced toward the body in the road. Her cry was terrible.

"Kevta!" She bent over the body. With tears streaming down her face, she checked for his vital signs. She placed her hands on his chest. "Kevta!" Her cry turned to a moan, and she collapsed, cradling his head.

Qui-Gon's face went pale. Obi-Wan saw that his Master could not tear his gaze away from the sight.

"Master," he said. "We need to go on, find out what happened..."

Qui-Gon's nod seemed to take forever. "One moment." His voice was hoarse.

He got off the landspeeder and walked to Yanci's side. He crouched by her and put a hand on her shoulder. He did not speak a word. He let his presence balance her grief until she was able to lift her head.

"I left him," she said, her voice broken. "He made me go. I am the best on a swoop, he said. I am the one who knows the quarries best. I was the one who could catch the Jedi. I left him!"

"You left in order to save your people," Qui-Gon said.

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"And I failed them. If Kevta is dead, I don't want to see the rest of the camp." Yanci gently laid her head on Kevta's chest. "I will stay here. I can't leave him."

Qui-Gon squeezed her shoulder. Then he stood. Wordlessly, he nodded at Obi-Wan. The two Jedi knew what they were about to find. Death lay ahead of them.

They walked farther into the camp. Some of the dwellings were still smoking from fires the Absolutes had set. Bodies lay alongside the road. The Rock Workers still clutched the tools they had used as weapons.

Obi-Wan saw Bini on the ground. Her sightless eyes stared up at the sky. He knelt beside her and gently closed her eyelids. "Sleep well," he murmured.

Qui-Gon entered the school. Several long moments passed before he exited. "It is better for you not to go in," he told Obi-Wan. "The Rock Workers tried to hide the children there. The Absolutes left no one alive."

Obi-Wan turned away. Qui-Gon was right. He did not need to see it.

The sound of a speeder rose above the eerie quiet. Eritha rode slowly toward them, her head turning to take in the devastation. She stopped the speeder and got out shakily.

"This is what they are capable of," she said, her face ashen. "I didn't know. Alani can't be part of this. She must not know the things that they are willing to do."

They continued their grim tour, looking for survivors. The death toll was complete. There was not a living being in the camp.

As they started back, they saw Yanci walking toward them. Her legs moved, but she did not seem to be powering them herself. She moved like a droid, with jerky, articulated motion.

"Everyone is gone," she said. "It was a massacre. There is nothing I can do. I can't find Bini –"

"I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said gently. "I found her."

Jude Watson

Yanci bowed her head. "I was jealous of Bini. She was close to Kevta. It was stupid of me. I can never tell her that." She wandered away and sat on the ground, her head in her hands.

"Yanci," Qui-Gon called. "Can you tell us what the Absolutes took this time?"

She lifted her head. "Everything," she said numbly. "All our blasting equipment is gone."

Qui-Gon nodded. It was what he had expected. "Let's look for clues," he said in a low tone to Obi-Wan.

They started with the target of the Absolutes – the sheds where the blasting equipment was stored. Here the fiercest fighting had taken place. Obi-Wan pushed down the revulsion he felt rise in his throat at the desperate postures of the dead. They lay as they had died, fighting to the last.

He concentrated on the task, picking over the ground carefully, then moving into the shed.

Qui-Gon stooped and sifted something through his fingers. When he held up his hand to Obi-Wan, his fingers were stained red.

"This soil is not from this area," he said. "The Absolutes tracked it in. Look at the boot marks. They aren't the same patterns as the Rock Workers'."

Obi-Wan bent and took a small sample of soil. He tapped it into a specimen container from his utility belt. "Let's ask Yanci. She said she knew the quarries better than anyone."

They returned to Yanci, and Obi-Wan showed her the soil. She rubbed it between her fingers.

"Red," she murmured. "I've seen this soil." She closed her eyes. When she opened them, her gaze was filled with certainty. "I know exactly where their hideout is."

Chapter Thirteen

Within minutes, Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Eritha were back on their transports. They had entered the coordinates Yanci had come up with into their nav systems.

Qui-Gon turned to Eritha. "I cannot order you to stay here. But I strongly recommend that you do so."

She shook her head. "You haven't been able to get rid of me yet. After seeing this, how can I stay behind?"

Qui-Gon turned away, displeased. It would be so much easier if he did not have to worry about Eritha. Despite her strong words, he knew she was not prepared for what they might find.

"The site is to the west, in the quarries abandoned years ago. As you get closer, the canyons will narrow," Yanci warned. "You will have to abandon your vehicles, even the swoop. You must approach on foot. There is a road, but I'm sure it will be under surveillance. This is the best way to approach without being seen."

"What will you do?" Obi-Wan asked, concerned. The haunted look had not left Yanci's eyes. She had been damaged and would never be the same.

"I will bury my dead," Yanci said.

Jude Watson

"I contacted the Workers in the city," Eritha told her. "They are sending help to you. They will be here by dawn tomorrow. Will you be all right?"

"I am with those I love," Yanci said. "I wish you success on your mission."

Qui-Gon turned away. He felt a heaviness inside him. For the first time since he had become a Jedi Knight, he could not face someone's grief. Grief was part of life, and Jedi saw it more than most. Qui-Gon knew the forms it could take, how it could twist and spiral into rage or revenge or dead numbness. There had been times when sorrow had been so much a part of what he saw that it became the only thing he saw. Part of his training had been to see the joy in the galaxy that existed alongside the grief. He remembered early in his life as a Jedi Knight how he had returned to the Temple for long talks with Yoda. Yoda had helped him see the balance in the galaxy, just as he had taught him the balance in the Force.

But now he looked at Yanci, and he saw a possibility of what he would become. His eyes would be that empty. His heart would be that shattered.

Qui-Gon accelerated the engines. The wind blew in his face, making his eyes tear. He knew he was pushing his craft in order to outrun his fear, and he knew it was not what a Jedi should do. But at that moment, the wind and the speed comforted him as no Jedi wisdom could.

Now that they had a clear direction, they made good time through the quarries. The landscape was rough, with unexpected looming cliffs and canyons. Yanci had prepared them for switchbacks and sudden huge pits of water as large as lakes.

At last they reached an area where the canyons narrowed to mere slits in the cliff walls. They abandoned their transports as Yanci had told them. They proceeded single file through the narrow passages.

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Qui-Gon took the lead. Ahead he saw a line of sky and ground and knew that soon they would be through. He slowed his pace and drew up to the opening.

In front of him the cliffs widened to embrace a small canyon. A deep pit was to the right, filled with water. The soil around the pit was a muddy red dotted with huge boulders. Sunlight danced on the smooth surface of the water. Some distance to the left he could see the dark opening of a cave. He saw no movement, no sign of living beings.

Obi-Wan and Eritha crowded behind him to scrutinize the area.

"There's no one here," Eritha said, disappointed. "Yanci was wrong."

Obi-Wan spoke quietly. "What do you think, Master? Are we in the wrong place?"

Qui-Gon reached out for the Force. He tested the air, searching for vibrations. He sent a message to Tahl. *I am here.*

He received something back a reverberation. Like a gentle touch on his cheek. Like a tiny sigh. Something

"No," he said. "This is the place."

Suddenly they saw the water ripple on the lake. The ripples grew into waves. The two Jedi grew alert.

"We're wasting time. We should go back," Eritha said.

The two Jedi remained focused on the lake. "There is no wind," Obi-Wan said.

"Exactly," Qui-Gon murmured.

A structure rose from the surface. Water streamed off its curved top. An opening slowly widened and a ramp emerged. It extended over the water to dry land. A few seconds later, two tech vehicles sped down the ramp, hit land, and then headed for the cave. They disappeared inside. They did not see the Jedi.

"Everything is hidden," Qui-Gon said. "The camp can't be seen from the air. Clever."

"How shall we infiltrate, then?" Obi-Wan asked.

Jude Watson

"We'll have to start with the cave. The tech vehicles didn't seem to go through a checkpoint," Qui-Gon said, scanning the cave entrance. "I don't think there are sensors outside the cave." He turned back to Eritha. "Stay here until we send for you."

"No. If you go without me, I'll follow you." Eritha's jaw set.

Qui-Gon frowned. "Then stay behind us. Realize that you can endanger this mission if you act hastily. You will follow my orders. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Eritha flashed a shaky grin. "I'm stubborn, but I'm not stupid."

"All right," Qui-Gon muttered. "Let's go."

Chapter Fourteen

They kept close to the cliff walls and boulders for as long as they could. Then they purposefully walked the short distance to the cave entrance. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan checked for scanners as they moved closer but saw none. Obi-Wan guessed that the Absolutes considered their hideout so well hidden that they did not need to install them.

They slipped into the darkness of the cave entrance with relief. Immediately to the right was a pen where gravsleds and small speeders were kept. There was a bin filled with tech jackets. Qui-Gon signaled to the others, and they each donned one. Eritha hid her hair under a cap and dirtied her face, so she was less recognizable.

Feeling a little less exposed, they proceeded farther into the cave. Glow rods set high in the walls gave faint illumination. They could see that the small opening to the cave was deceptive. As they moved deeper into it, the space widened and extended far in the distance.

"It goes out under the water," Qui-Gon said in a low tone. "This is bigger than it appears."

Ahead a few Absolutes in the same tech jackets came walking toward them. Qui-Gon gave them an impersonal nod of greeting. They nodded back and continued walking.

Jude Watson

Eritha let out a shaky breath. "Whew."

"It appears that there are enough Absolutes working here that not everyone knows one another," Qui-Gon murmured. "Good. Obi-Wan, look for any high-security devices on the tunnels leading off the cave. That could mean that Tahl is being held there."

Obi-Wan could feel his Master's tension. They were so close now. He reached out to the Force to help him with his perceptions. Nothing could go wrong now. If they were captured, it would mean a delay that could cost Tahl her life.

They paused by a tunnel that was lined with computer equipment. "This must be the tech-control area," Qui-Gon said. He moved away quickly as someone walked out of a durasteel door and began checking the equipment.

They walked on, passing other beings who either nodded or walked quickly, focused on their business. Eritha kept her face turned away in case she was recognized despite her disguise. Obi-Wan noted a security sensor bank near an offshoot tunnel. He pointed it out to Qui-Gon.

"Let's try it," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan studied the offshoot tunnel entrance. "There's a retinal scan grid to the right. If we pass through, an alarm will go off."

Qui-Gon studied the sensors and the retinal scan carefully. "They mounted it too low," he said. "I think if we use cable launchers, we can swing over the sensors without tripping them. They probably didn't have time to perfect the system. Look at the drill marks around the sensors. This was done recently."

"Since Balog brought Tahl here?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Maybe." Qui-Gon turned to Eritha. "You must stay here, Eritha. Alert us with the silent alarm on your comlink if there's trouble. We'll be back as soon as we can. If a patrol comes, walk away as though you have a destination, then circle back. If you hear an alarm sound, hide. It does not necessarily mean that Obi-

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Wan and I have been captured. Turn on your homing device on your comlink and we'll find you."

Eritha nodded. "I'll be all right."

Obi-Wan saw that Qui-Gon didn't like to leave her, but they had no choice. He watched as his Master aimed carefully, sending his cable launcher high into the air to bite into the ceiling of the offshoot tunnel. He activated the launcher and it carried him high above. His head almost bumped the ceiling of the cave, but he cleared the sensors and landed on the other side.

Obi-Wan hoped he would have the same graceful skill. He followed Qui-Gon's lead, holding his breath until his own cable launcher was secure. Then he activated the launch mode. It pulled him up quickly, and he scraped against the rough ceiling. He was over the range of the sensors, and was pulled into the tunnel. He landed next to Qui-Gon.

They hurried down the tunnel. At the end was a durasteel door set into the cave wall. There was no security panel outside the door.

"What now? If Tahl is in there, someone could be with her."

Qui-Gon closed his eyes. "I don't feel her," he said in a low voice. "But we need to find out why this tunnel has such high security when the others don't. We have to go in."

He activated his lightsaber and cut through the durasteel, making an opening big enough for them to walk through. Qui-Gon ducked inside the room, and Obi-Wan quickly followed.

They were in a storage area filled with bins and crates. There was no sign of Tahl or of the sensory deprivation device she had been imprisoned in. Instead, the room was filled with explosives. Crate after crate was labeled, showing that there were extremely powerful devices within.

"This must be what they stole from the Rock Workers," Obi-Wan said.

"And some bought on the black market, as well," Qui-Gon added. "Look. This is Mota's mark. They have enough explosives here to level the city."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan looked worriedly at his Master. "What does this mean?"

"That they are prepared to take over with violence, if they must," Qui-Gon said. "But why the change in plan? As far as we knew, the Absolutes were working to gain power through infiltration and deceit."

Qui-Gon gave a last swift look around. "Let's go, Padawan. There's nothing here to lead us to Tahl. And I don't like leaving Eritha back there alone."

Not to mention that they had left a gaping hole in a security door, Obi-Wan thought. As soon as that was discovered, the complex would go on alert.

They ran back down the tunnel toward the main cave. Suddenly, Obi-Wan felt a disturbance in the Force. His steps slowed just as Qui-Gon's did.

They didn't need to compare notes. They both knew what they had felt. Something had gone wrong.

They melted back against the wall of the tunnel, then proceeded carefully. The cave came into sight. They saw Eritha surrounded by security. Obviously she was trying to bluff, and not succeeding. She gave one last, desperate look down the tunnel.

Qui-Gon put his hand on Obi-Wan's arm to prevent him from moving.

"We can't," he murmured. "As soon as they see us, they'll sound an alarm. Whoever is holding Tahl will know the cave has been invaded. We can't risk it. Let's see how Eritha deals with this."

Eritha pitched her voice loudly, and it echoed off the walls of the cave. "You fools, don't you know who I am? I am Eritha, daughter of Ewane. Contact my sister Alani right this minute. We are *helping* the Absolutes, you idiots!"

"You are a Worker – " one of the security officers started.

"I am a patriot!" Eritha shouted. "Now let me go!"

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"We'll have to check this out first," the officer said. "You'll have to come with us."

"I will not forget this!" Eritha said as they placed her in the center of the group and began to march her off. "I will get each of your names and you will be hearing from us!"

"She certainly didn't show fear," Obi-Wan said admiringly.

"Yes, she handled it well," Qui-Gon said as he stepped out from the shelter of the tunnel wall. "Unfortunately, now we have two to rescue."

Chapter Fifteen

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan waited a moment, then slipped out of the tunnel. Obi-Wan could see that his Master was disturbed by this turn of events. They kept a good distance between themselves and Eritha and her guards, but kept her in sight. The guards marched her farther inside the cave until they came to another high-security entrance to a tunnel. One of the guards accessed the security panel and punched in a code, then pressed his eye against the sensor. When the sensor cleared him, they half-carried Eritha through the opening and down the tunnel.

"They could be keeping Tahl there," Obi-Wan said. "No doubt it's where they take prisoners."

"Most likely," Qui-Gon said. He studied the tunnel entrance. "But this time we are not so lucky. The sensors are well placed. We won't be able to get in without attracting attention. When those sensors go off, we could be putting Eritha's and Tahl's lives in danger. And the Absolutes aren't stupid. They probably suspect that Eritha wasn't alone when she infiltrated the cave."

"Any other ideas?"

"I think there's only one thing to do," Qui-Gon said. "We need a diversion."

They retraced their steps back to the weapons tunnel. Using the same method, they propelled themselves past the sensors and

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safely into the tunnel. Then they ran back to the room where the explosives were kept.

Qui-Gon quickly read the labels on the various bins. "We must be careful," he warned. "Too much, and we risk collapsing the cave. But there has to be enough to cause confusion and chaos."

Obi-Wan was not an expert on explosives. He let Qui-Gon choose what they needed. Qui-Gon handed him a supply of small explosives.

"We'll have to set these up away from here," Qui-Gon said. "If we're too close, it could cause a chain reaction."

He tucked more explosives inside his tunic along with timing devices. "This should do it. No one should get hurt, but there will be confusion. That's all we'll need. As soon as we get Tahl and Eritha, we'll head to the cave entrance."

"What if we're spotted?" Obi-Wan asked. "No doubt everyone will be heading there."

"We'll have to get a tech jacket for Tahl. We'll just have to count on the smoke and confusion."

Obi-Wan remembered what Lenz and Irini had said about the drug that was used to paralyze subjects inside the deprivation device. He was prepared for the fact that Tahl might not be able to walk or move. Qui-Gon did not seem to want to deal with that possibility.

"Hurry, Obi-Wan. We need to get to Eritha before they do something to her."

Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon back to the cave. They set a small amount of explosives farther down the cave, toward the entrance, then a second at the entrance to the tech-control tunnel. Then they hurried back toward the transport pen.

"We'll set these to go off later," Qui-Gon said. "It will be a small explosion, but it should destroy most of the transports. Just in case we're followed." He grabbed another tech jacket and rolled it up, shoving it inside his own. "Now let's get back to where they took Eritha."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan had seen his Master focused before. This was different. His gaze was intent, his every movement economical. Although Obi-Wan could feel Qui-Gon's anxiety, there was no trace of it in his speech or his actions. He appeared completely calm. Where did the desperation go? Obi-Wan admired how his Master had taken his emotion and given it discipline and purpose. It was a supreme example of how a Jedi should act.

They were steps away from the first tunnel offshoot when the initial explosion went off. The cave seemed to rock for a moment, the walls and rocks shuddering. A siren wailed, and suddenly Absolutes appeared in the cave halls, running out from the various branches and tunnels.

"It's back that way!" Qui-Gon shouted. He feinted a move in that direction and he and Obi-Wan ran a few steps. They let themselves be overtaken before turning back the way they were headed.

Smoke began to drift back toward them. Obi-Wan saw a figure appear and disappear ahead of them amid the drifting smoke.

"I think it's Balog," he said to Qui-Gon. "He's headed toward the explosives tunnel."

They melted back against the cave wall and watched as Balog went through the retinal scan and hurried back toward the tunnel.

"Should we follow?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Let's wait here. We know Tahl isn't back there. When he returns, we'll follow him," Qui-Gon said.

Another explosion split the air. Smoke rolled back toward them.

"That should be the tech center," Qui-Gon said.

Suddenly Balog appeared, darting out of the side tunnel. Obi-Wan recognized his squat, muscular body and powerful stride. Ignoring those who were rushing toward the cave entrance, he headed in the opposite direction.

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Qui-Gon nodded grimly. "When one's home is burning, one goes for the most valuable item."

"He's heading for Tahl," Obi-Wan agreed.

The two Jedi followed him. Obi-Wan expected Balog to turn toward the tunnel where Eritha was being held, but he kept going. Another explosion rocked the cave. This time it was followed by another, smaller boom.

"The fuel tanks of the vehicles," Qui-Gon said.

They passed a side tunnel with a readout sign: UW BASE ENTRANCE. Obi-Wan took note of it as he passed. It had to be the entrance to the underwater part of the secret complex.

Balog abruptly turned into a small tunnel without security sensors. They plunged into the tunnel behind him. The glow rods were not operational, and the darkness was almost complete. They could only see the gleam of a durasteel door just ahead.

Balog paused outside the door to access it. Obi-Wan hesitated, unsure of what to do. But beside him, Qui-Gon was already moving. His Master put on a burst of speed as Balog slipped through the door. With a mighty leap, Qui-Gon followed him, and the door slid shut.

Chapter Sixteen

Qui-Gon landed with his lightsaber already activated. Behind him, he heard the door close.

Balog stood in the center of the room between Qui-Gon and Tahl. The sensory deprivation device was leaning against the cave wall with Tahl inside. He could only see her eyes through a small viewscreen. He knew she was alive. Her eyelids fluttered. She could still feel his presence, as she always had. A slight tremor in the Force told him that she was trying to reach out to him.

Obi-Wan began to cut through the durasteel with his lightsaber. Qui-Gon could smell the melting metal. He kept his gaze steady on Balog, who was smiling faintly.

Then Balog laughed.

"You think you can threaten me? You think that you and your young friend can frighten me? What you don't know is that I have all the power here." He held up a small transmitter. "I can take away her life."

Obi-Wan burst through the hole in the door and stopped short, his lightsaber ready.

"Don't move, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said steadily.

"Do you see this?" Balog asked, holding the transmitter aloft. "I can give your friend a last, lethal dose. She is very weak. I

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wanted to keep her alive, but I've come to realize that there is no need."

"What do you want?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Nothing from you," Balog said contemptuously. "You've done enough already. You found this place. Well, your Worker allies won't find anything here when they arrive. No records. Nothing to spy on, nothing to steal."

"You set the weapons room to detonate," Qui-Gon guessed.

"I'll be gone before that happens. We have plenty of support in the city. We don't need these followers to accomplish what we need to."

"You don't care what lives are lost."

"I care about Apsolon. *My* Apsolon," Balog said fiercely. "Not the Apsolon the Workers want. You Jedi are in my way." He stepped back and accessed a door behind him. A tiny space contained a small transport with a bubble-shaped top. Another door was cut into the far wall. No doubt it was to allow the exit of the transport into the lake. The interior door would close, allowing the compartment to flood.

"Now I'm leaving. You may make it out of here when the explosives room goes, but I doubt it – especially when you have to drag your friend along." Balog pointed to Tahl with his chin. "And believe me, she's in no shape to walk. I made sure of that."

Qui-Gon tensed, then relaxed. It took an effort of will to absorb his anger and continue to wait for his opening.

"I leave you to your fate," Balog said, stepping back toward the transport. His small, dark eyes glinted. "Don't move, either of you. You see my finger near this button? If you try to stop me and are a fraction off, if you stumble, if you give me only a split second, I can press it. If you move toward me, I could flinch and press it. If, in short, one of the thousand things that could go wrong does go wrong, Tahl will die."

Qui-Gon sprang. He had never moved faster or more surely. He knew that Balog did not see him, that one moment he was standing meters away and the next he was in the air next to him.

Jude Watson

With careful precision, Qui-Gon brought his lightsaber down, neatly slicing off Balog's finger. The transmitter fell to the floor.

"I guess you didn't flinch," Qui-Gon said. Howling with pain and rage, Balog backed up toward the transport as he fumbled for his blaster with his good hand. Obi-Wan sprang forward as Qui-Gon headed for Tahl. Another explosion rocked the cave, this one larger than before. The force of the blast almost knocked Obi-Wan to the ground. The sensory deprivation device began to slide. Qui-Gon threw himself toward it and caught it in his arms. He laid it down gently.

Instead of attacking Obi-Wan, Balog aimed his fire at the sensory deprivation device. Qui-Gon ignored the ping of blaster fire around his head; he knew his Padawan would deflect it. A chain of explosions went off and dirt began to rain down from the cave ceiling. Obi-Wan sprang into the tiny holding room as Balog scrambled into the transport.

"Leave him, Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon shouted. He put his lightsaber to work, cutting away at the deprivation device.

Balog accessed the exit. Water poured into the tiny room, knocking Obi-Wan off his feet. His lightsaber shorted out.

Qui-Gon had a bigger worry: Soon the room would be flooded.

"Obi-Wan!"

Balog's transport took off underwater, bouncing wildly as it fought against the impact of the water gushing toward the opening.

"Let him go!" Qui-Gon bellowed. "Tahl will drown!" The deprivation device was now floating. Qui-Gon held his lightsaber aloft. If it touched the water, it would short out, too. Qui-Gon could feel Tahl's life force flickering. They had to get her out of here.

Obi-Wan struggled to his feet. The water was now up to his knees. He felt his leg ache as he pushed toward Qui-Gon, who had opened a seam in the side of the device.

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"That sounded like the main weapons room," Qui-Gon said tersely. "The cave could collapse. Let's get Tahl out of here."

Water was now almost to their waists. Qui-Gon deactivated his lightsaber and quickly tucked it into his belt. Desperately, he lifted Tahl out of the device. She said nothing, her head flopping against his chest as though she couldn't support it. To see her so weak sent agony ripping through him. They struggled through the water toward the opening Obi-Wan had cut in the door.

Once they were through the opening, they were able to stand. Water was pouring through the opening, and the door was starting to strain against its bolts, but the water in the tunnel was only ankle deep. They ran, splashing through the flooding, and reached the dry area of the cave. The smoke was thick and acrid now, burning their lungs. The cave area was deserted.

Qui-Gon allowed Tahl to slide down his body so that she was on her feet. Her legs immediately gave way. He picked her up again and cradled her against him. He had to control his anger against Balog for her sake. What she needed from him was calm.

"Tahl," he said gently. "We're going to get you out of here."

One hand curled around his neck. He felt the gesture, her cold hand against his neck, and it curdled his blood. It was the same gesture she had made in the vision, the gesture that had told him how close to death she was.

She managed to smile up at him. "It is too late for me, dear friend," she said softly.

Chapter Seventeen

They knew the Jedi Masters were watching. They were only ten years old, too young yet to be chosen as Padawans. But they knew the choice was coming soon. Some Jedi students had been chosen as young as eleven.

It was called Exhibition Day, and they had performed exercises while the Jedi Masters watched. Force exercises, balance, endurance, climbing, jumping, swimming. Sometimes they split into teams of two or four. It was play, but it was also serious.

The last exercise was a series of training lightsaber matches. Some were done blindfolded. Some pitted one student against two attackers. Qui-Gon won all his matches. It came down to him and Clee Rhara and Tabl. Then Tabl beat Clee Rhara.

"Guess that leaves us," she whispered as she bowed to him at the start of the final match. "Don't worry. I'll go easy on you."

They had been matched many times before. He knew how fast she was. She knew how strong he was. Knowing each other's strengths made the match more interesting. Qui-Gon found fighting Tabl to be both exhausting and exhilarating. It brought out his best skills.

They whirled around the space, using every inch of wall and floor. All the Jedi students admired Tabl's gymnastic abilities. She could run up a wall, twist, and come at you with a sweeping backhand twist that left you dizzy.

Tabl fought hard. Qui-Gon admired how just when he thought she was tiring, she would find fresh strength. He could not match her agility, but he

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was able to surprise her with strategy. He saw her eyes flash with astonishment and her teeth grit in determination as she parried his blows and came at him with a series of twists and reversals.

The match was not timed. It would only end when one of them scored a blow. Exhaustion began to slow their moves, but they did not stop or make mistakes. He could hear the murmur among the spectators, wondering how long the two students could continue. He sensed more Jedi Masters arriving.

Tabl's face was a mask. She had gone deep within herself, past her exhaustion to a place of sheer will. Qui-Gon had never felt so tired. His arm muscles shook. His legs felt watery. They trembled. Still he did not stop or make a mistake.

Then Tabl's foot slipped. Just a fraction, but it was enough. The floor was wet with their sweat. She left herself vulnerable for one split second, and he moved forward, kicking out with one foot and driving the lightsaber from her grasp. At the same time he brought his own lightsaber close to her. He did not touch her with it. He was not willing to give her even the slightest sting from the training saber.

"Match to Qui-Gon," one of the Jedi Masters spoke.

Qui-Gon and Tabl bowed to each other. Then they collapsed together on a bench nearby.

"A good match," he said, panting.

"It would have been better if I'd won." He shook his head. "Don't you ever give up?"

She wiped the sweat off her forehead with a towel. "Never"

Qui-Gon felt disoriented, as though he were in a dream. He was living inside his vision. His greatest fear had visited him. He thought he had known desperation in that vision, but the living reality was far worse.

Tahl's eyes closed, and she slumped against him. He felt her muscles go slack, and she melted against him as though she no longer had bones. He had never realized Tahl could feel so soft against him. He had only known her strength. He held her against his chest.

"You should leave me," she whispered. "I don't have long..."

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He leaned his head down to speak into her ear. "No. It is not too late. You never give up. The Force is still with you. I am with you. You cannot leave me now. Not now."

"I... will try, for you," she breathed. "Qui-Gon, we must go," Obi-Wan said desperately.

He nodded and let his Padawan lead the way. Tahl was no burden. She felt light in his arms.

Fissures had opened in the ceiling, and water streamed in from above. The cave was slowly collapsing. Water poured out of the side tunnel where Balog had left.

"Do you think we can reach the cave entrance?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon eyed the water pouring from the ceiling and the thick smoke ahead. "Doubtful. We can try to find another way out."

"There is another... exit," Tahl said. Qui-Gon had to bend down to hear her. "To the underwater base."

"I saw it," Obi-Wan said. "Let's try it. But what about Eritha?"

Qui-Gon hesitated. "Let's get to the entrance to the underwater base first." He did not want to have to decide between Tahl's life and Eritha's. But he knew he could not leave without looking for the young girl.

Tahl stirred again. "Eritha is here? We can't leave her, we must..." Each word seemed to cost her a great effort.

Qui-Gon stilled her with a hand on her hair. "We won't."

The cave had been evacuated. Another explosion shook the cave and they staggered with its power. More water streamed from the ceiling.

They reached the side tunnel that led to the underwater structure. Obi-Wan looked at Qui-Gon anxiously as the water grew deeper, now swirling around their knees. It was icy cold.

"The tunnel where Eritha was held is just ahead," Qui-Gon said. "Try there first. I will stay here with Tahl. If Eritha is not there, come back here." If necessary, he would get Tahl out and

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return for Eritha. He could feel how weak Tahl's connection to the Force was. It frightened him.

Obi-Wan turned to hurry away, but from the smoky dimness they suddenly saw a figure pushing through the water toward them. It was Eritha, her braided hair now loose and wet.

"They left me! They forgot about me!" she screamed, almost collapsing in Obi-Wan's arms. "They set off explosives. The cave is collapsing!"

"It's all right," Obi-Wan told her. "We'll get you out of here."

He supported her and brought her back to Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon accessed the entrance to the underwater structure. They squeezed through quickly to prevent more water from flooding the connecting tunnel.

The relative dryness of the connecting tunnel was reassuring. Smoke had not penetrated, and they breathed easier. The Absolutes had not chosen to blow up the underwater structure.yet.

The connecting tunnel was fabricated from white duraplast, with occasional transparent viewscreens that allowed watery light to filter in from above. They passed through it quickly and entered the main structure.

This was obviously where the majority of the tech centers were housed. The cave had been used for storage. They passed room after room of holofile cabinets and computer banks. The offices were empty. No doubt this part of the complex had been evacuated as well.

"Do you think Balog is planning to blow this area, too?" Obi-Wan asked Qui-Gon.

"Possibly. But he might not have had time. We need to find the ramp that can get us to shore." Qui-Gon knew the shore of the lake was to his right. As soon as they found a main corridor, it would lead to the ramp exit.

Obi-Wan ran ahead with Eritha. When they came to a main corridor, Qui-Gon was glad to see his Padawan turn right. He

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relaxed a bit, allowing his Padawan to lead them. He turned his attention to Tahl.

He could see a pale blue vein throb near one of her closed eyes. It reassured him. Her life systems were still operating, her body still functioning. The weakness he felt could be reversed. Her systems had been shut down for several days. It would take time for her to regain her strength. That was all she needed. Time. He held her more securely against him.

Ahead, he saw Obi-Wan stop at the ramp control. He pressed his eye against the panel. "There's an electroscope," he said, drawing away as Qui-Gon came up. "I don't think we can activate the ramp. We'd be spotted easily."

Qui-Gon leaned forward and put his eye against the electroscope. It gave a view of the shore and the cave entrance. Smoke continued to billow out from the cave. Absolutes gathered on the shore. Someone was organizing a retreat with the remaining functioning vehicles. If they activated the ramp, they would land right in the middle of them. Obi-Wan was right. Qui-Gon felt sure that even if the Jedi weren't recognized, Eritha or Tahl would be. Eritha had lost her tech jacket. Tahl was in no condition to walk.

"We have to swim," Qui-Gon decided. "If we swim far enough away, we can skirt those boulders and pass through the canyon to our vehicles." He hesitated. "Can you?" he asked Obi-Wan. "Your leg..."

"I can," Obi-Wan said firmly. "I'll give my breather to Eritha."

Qui-Gon lowered Tahl carefully to the floor. Her feet couldn't hold her, so he laid her gently down. He took out his breather from his utility belt.

"Tahl?"

Her head turned. Qui-Gon's heart broke at how lackluster her response was.

"We have to swim. Can you use a breather?"

There was a quirk at the edge of her lips. Almost a smile. "Only since I was three."

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He smiled and gently fitted the tube on her. "When we get to the beach, we'll have a short way to walk. I'll carry you. Our transports aren't far."

She nodded slightly. He knew she was saving her strength.

Qui-Gon motioned to the emergency exit lever. Eritha had donned Obi-Wan's breather. Qui-Gon knew that it would be a long swim for Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan was a powerful swimmer, but the leg injury worried Qui-Gon.

They accessed the door, which opened into a small chamber. There was a panel in the ceiling. Slowly, the chamber began to fill with water. The water was cold, and Qui-Gon felt Tahl's involuntary shiver. They floated up toward the ceiling. Qui-Gon nodded at Obi-Wan and the two Jedi took their deepest breath. The panel slid open and they swam out.

Qui-Gon did not feel the cold water. He did not feel fatigued. Tahl felt buoyant in his arms, so buoyant that he felt his hopes rise. He swam with his Padawan by his side. Both of them kept their eye on Eritha, with Obi-Wan drifting back to help her if she lagged.

His lungs began to ache. The smoke had weakened them. Qui-Gon peered ahead, but couldn't see the shoreline. There would be no gradual rise, since the pit was dug for mining purposes. His speed was hampered by being able to use only one arm, but his kicks were powerful and propelled him forward.

At last Obi-Wan's feet touched bottom. He surfaced, then quickly signaled an okay. Qui-Gon surfaced as well, taking deep lungfuls of air. Obi-Wan was doing the same.

Even as they took deep breaths, they moved toward the shore. The Absolutes were lining up to be transported away. No one noticed them as they ran up the short distance to the boulders. From there it was easy to slip into the narrow crevices between the high cliffs. The rough ground made for hard walking. Qui-Gon's arms began to ache with the effort of holding Tahl. Obi-Wan was limping slightly, but he still was able to move quickly.

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"Almost there," Qui-Gon told Tahl. He did not know if she was conscious.

They found their transports where they had left them. Relief flooded Qui-Gon. His last fear was that the Absolutes would have found them.

"Take my landspeeder, Qui-Gon," Eritha offered. "It is faster than yours."

"Thank you." Qui-Gon gently placed Tahl in the companion seat.

He swung into the pilot seat and glanced over. As always, she could sense when he was looking at her. And as always, she could sense his mood.

"Stop being so worried," she said quietly. "I'll try."

"I'm gaining strength every moment from your strength."

He took her hand. He called up the Force from the air around them. He felt her do the same, though her hold on the Force was weak. It was all right. He would provide the extra strength she needed. He felt their power combine.

Eritha came to stand by the speeder. "Go directly to the Supreme Governor's residence," she said. "I will call ahead and have med care waiting for you."

Qui-Gon nodded his thanks. He activated the engines.

"I will see you in New Apsolon," he told Obi-Wan. He reached inside his tunic and handed Tahl's lightsaber to Obi-Wan. "Until yours recharges."

"I will guard it with my life." Obi-Wan swallowed. The concern in his eyes was all for Tahl. He gently touched her shoulder. "Safe journey."

Tahl answered weakly. "Thank you for finding me, Obi-Wan."

"May the Force be with you," Obi-Wan said. "It is," Qui-Gon said confidently, and raced off.

Chapter Eighteen

There was still a long journey ahead of them to New Apsolon. Qui-Gon would not stop. He would drive through the rest of the day and the night. With the extra power of Eritha's land-speeder, he should be at the edge of New Apsolon by dawn.

Tahl slid into a deep sleep. That would restore her. Qui-Gon reached for a thermal cape and covered her. The temperature fell as the suns slid down in the sky, melting over the horizon in tones of blazing red and gold. The rocks and cliffs around him turned pink. For the first time in a long while, Qui-Gon noticed the beauty. It was because Tahl was next to him, and he wanted her to be a part of it. He did not wake her, but silently he told her, *Do not leave me. We have so much left to share together.*

The moons rose, three delicate, luminous crescents. The stars seemed even more brilliant next to the waning moons. Qui-Gon activated the speeder's protective dome and turned on the heating unit. Whenever he reached over to check Tahl's pulse, the coldness of her skin shocked him. He did not feel hunger but he ate a food capsule and drank water. He had a long night to get through.

Hours later, Tahl awoke. She pulled herself up a little straighter. She looked more alert, Qui-Gon noted with relief.

"It's cold," she said.

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Qui-Gon had felt too warm, but he set the heating unit to maximum. "It's the middle of the night."

"Thank you for everything you have done," Tahl said. "I don't like being rescued. I was furious at myself for being in that position again."

"Don't worry," Qui-Gon said. "You have rescued me in the past. I'm sure you will again."

"Balog wanted something from me. That's why he kept me alive."

"Don't talk now. Save your strength. There will be time in New Apsolon," Qui-Gon said.

"No, I need to tell you. There is a list of informers among the Workers –"

"I know this."

"Balog thought I had it. Naturally I pretended I knew where it was. So he kept me alive. But in that deprivation device I had time to think. Why did he believe I had the list?"

"Because you were undercover and could have had access?" Qui-Gon suggested.

"Is that reason enough to kidnap me?" Tahl shook her head. "I don't think so. So I went over that last day undercover. I still don't know how they found out I was a Jedi."

"Perhaps it was Alani," Qui-Gon said. "Eritha claims that Alani is in league with Balog. She wants to take over as Supreme Governor."

"Alani?" Tahl asked, surprised. "But she found the way to smuggle me into the Absolutes in the first place."

"She had a reason to keep you there, perhaps," Qui-Gon said. "When you were no longer useful, she betrayed you."

"And perhaps she hoped I would find the list," Tahl said slowly. Every word was an effort. "Naturally I would tell the girls I had found it. I trusted them."

"Do you remember anything significant about your last day?"

The thermal cape slipped off her shoulders, and Tahl drew it around her. "So cold..." she murmured. "Someone helped me

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that last day. I had seconds to get out of the hideout before they came for me. I ran into a message runner named Oleg. He was a low-level member of the Absolutes. Instead of turning me in, he helped me. He showed me a door the message runners used. When I asked him why he helped me, he said he was escaping, too. He had been marked for interrogation by the Absolute leaders. He did not know why, but he was leaving before he could find out."

"Look," Qui-Gon said. "The lights of the city are ahead."

It was still dark. The city lights on the horizon seemed to merge with the stars.

"Almost there," Qui-Gon said. "Rest. We'll talk later."

Tahl's voice had been growing softer. Now she closed her eyes and slid into sleep.

Dawn grew slowly. The landscape lightened. The city grew closer. They were low on fuel, but the computer told him they would make it.

Tahl slept on as the suns broke free of the horizon. The orange rays lit her body, instantly transforming her skin into its usual radiant health. Qui-Gon knew it was an illusion, but he took comfort in the sight.

Qui-Gon quickly maneuvered the Landspeeder through the crowded morning streets. He turned down State Boulevard toward the Supreme Governor's residence. As he pulled up, a figure hurried down the steps toward them. It was Roan's brother, Manex.

"Eritha contacted me to say you were arriving," he said. "I have arranged the finest med care in the city for Tahl. It is a short distance away. If you'll follow me." Manex pointed to his own landspeeder.

Qui-Gon hesitated. It was odd that Manex had met them outside. Eritha had promised them access to her own med care, which was in the residence itself.

Manex took note of his hesitation. "You must trust me," he said urgently. "Did I not tell you that I have the best of

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everything? My med care is exceptional. The med squad once worked on victims of the Absolutes. They had the greatest success. The doctor knows Tahl's condition. He can help." Manex glanced at Tahl, whose head was back and her eyes were closed.

It was the compassionate, worried look in Manex's eyes more than his words that made Qui-Gon nod. His instincts told him that Manex was sincere. Tahl needed the best care.

"Good," Manex said at Qui-Gon's nod. He sprinted toward his landspeeder, moving quickly for a man of his bulk. He jumped in and took off.

Qui-Gon followed closely. Manex pulled up in front of a gray stone building a few blocks away.

Immediately the doors opened and a med team rushed out.

A doctor bent over Tahl. Her eyes fluttered open. He applied a diagnostic readout to the side of her neck and frowned at the results.

"Will she be all right?"

"We will do the best we can."

The med team transferred Tahl to a wheeled stretcher. She was gone before he had a chance to touch her hand or tell her he'd be waiting. Qui-Gon sat numbly in the pilot seat, the speeder controls solid in his clenched fists, willing his own control not to slip away.

Chapter Nineteen

Qui-Gon sat by the shore of the lake and stared at the cliff. The rocky surface seemed completely sheer. The cliff looked impossibly big. But most things looked pretty big to him. He was eight years old.

They had already climbed the cliff face with cable launchers in class. They had learned to use their body's weight and hone their balance, correct their timing. They had done it over and over again. Next week, they would do it without cable launchers under the supervision of a Jedi Master. It would be one of their Force exercises.

He knew he should not be thinking of climbing it freehand. But he was. Qui-Gon wanted to gobble up the challenges the Jedi teachers threw at the students. A week was too long to wait. It wasn't so very high, really. It was just a big rock. There were handholds and footholds, even if he couldn't see them. If he fell, he would fall into the lake.

If he were caught, he would be in trouble. Then again, he wouldn't get caught. It was dawn and the lake area was deserted.

He heard the rustle behind him and turned. It was a fellow student, Tabl. She was in his class, but he didn't know her very well. She was slight, smaller than the rest of them. She looked like a little boy, he thought. He did not think of himself as a little boy.

She nodded at the cliff. "You thinking of climbing it?"

Startled, he was about to say no. But Jedi did not lie, even for small things. "Accustomed to the lie, you become," Yoda had warned them. "Easy

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it becomes to be false in big things, if false you are in small ones. " So he said nothing.

To his surprise, she grinned. "Come on." When he hesitated, she added, "Bet I can beat you to the top."

She ran and launched herself at the rock face, grabbing her first handhold. He hesitated for just a moment, surprised at how eagerly she attacked the rock. Then she seemed to mold herself against it. She waited until Qui-Gon ran forward and joined her.

It was harder than he'd thought. The handholds that seemed so firm to him with a cable on his belt now seemed impossibly tiny. The rock had become his enemy. It was tricky to keep his balance. Sweat began to pour down his face. His muscles shook with effort. He forgot about Tabl's challenge and concentrated on not falling off

He was three-quarters of the way to the top when he looked over at her. They were neck and neck. Her face was grimy and sweaty. She grinned.

The grin spurred him on. He found the next handhold, then the next. She was behind him now, and he was almost there. He searched for the next handhold, his face pressed against the rough rock.

Suddenly she was beside him, climbing easily. Then she was ahead of him, her hand reaching for the top. She swung herself up and over, then sat, breathing hard.

Qui-Gon followed, feeling furious and ashamed. She had beaten him. When he turned to Tabl, he expected to see triumph in her eyes. Instead, he saw excitement.

"I felt it, Qui-Gon! I felt the Force!" She slapped the ground, her green-gold eyes blazing. "The rock – it was part of me. I was part of... everything. Even the air! It was just the way Yoda said it would be."

Now he was envious as well as embarrassed.

"I can tell you what you did wrong," she said, nudging him with a shoulder. "You hated the rock. You fought it. I did, too, in the beginning. You need to love the rock."

Love the rock? That sounded silly. Qui-Gon wanted to tell her that. But he knew what she meant. And suddenly, he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

Tabl stood. "Now for the reward. Come on!" She ran forward and leaped off the end of the rock, straight into the shimmering green water.

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Qui-Gon followed. It was a long drop, but the shock of the water felt refreshing. Tahl waited underwater for him. She grinned, and Qui-Gon smiled back. The cool water felt so good, and he had climbed the rock. Next time he would do better. Next time, he would love the rock.

They burst up to the surface. Tahl's dark hair was slicked back off her forehead. Now she looked like a water creature, sleek and supple.

Suddenly, she frowned. "Someone's coming," she murmured. "Do you see? Down by the path."

Qui-Gon said nothing. But a fraction of a second later, he noticed a disturbance in the overhanging leaves, far down the path.

"We're supposed to be in meditation right now," she whispered.

"This way," he said. He stroked to the edge of the lake, where a rocky outcropping would shield them.

They waited in the shadows, shivering a little from the coolness of the water. They heard the unmistakable sound of Yoda's shuffling step. Of all the Jedi Masters, for Yoda to catch them!

Qui-Gon's eyes narrowed in concern, but Tahl looked as though she would burst out laughing. Qui-Gon placed a hand over her mouth, and, grinning, she did the same to him.

Yoda stopped on the path over their heads. They did not breathe. After a moment, he moved on.

After Yoda had moved away, Tahl dropped her hand, and Qui-Gon dropped his.

"You know, you almost beat me to the top," she said. "We could be rivals. But I think it would be better if we were friends."

"Let's be friends," Qui-Gon agreed. He spoke soberly. He took friendship seriously. Already he knew he wanted to be friends with this girl.

As if she couldn't contain herself any longer, Tahl dived underwater and moved away from him. She came up, shaking off water. The sun was shining, and the rays made the droplets shimmer.

"Friends forever!" she called to him, treading water. "Deal?"

"Deal," he said.

Forever.

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon was still waiting when Obi-Wan burst into the small waiting area in the med complex a few hours later.

"Any news?"

Qui-Gon shook his head. "They are still with her."

"Have you seen her?"

"Not since I got here. Soon, they say." Eritha hurried in. "How is Tahl?"

"She is holding her own," Qui-Gon said. "Other than that, I don't know."

Eritha paced in front of him. "I don't understand why Manex had you bring her here. Well, I do. He always thinks what he has is the best. Where is he?"

"He waited with me for some time," Qui-Gon said. "He left to attend to some things at his home. He said he would be back."

She sat down and pressed her palms together. "I hate waiting. I know the Jedi don't feel that way."

"We hate it, too," Obi-Wan said. "We are just better at it."

Not so, Qui-Gon thought. The past two hours had been the hardest of his life.

Eritha waited for some minutes, then restlessly got up. "I need some air. Will you contact me as soon as we know something?"

Obi-Wan assured her that they would. He remained next to Qui-Gon, not speaking. Qui-Gon felt his Padawan's sympathy and concern. He was grateful for his presence. It was easier not to wait alone. He knew that Obi-Wan loved Tahl, too.

"Did Tahl say anything about the kidnapping?" Obi-Wan asked him quietly.

"Balog was looking for the list of informers, just as Irini and Lenz thought," Qui-Gon said. He briefly told Obi-Wan what Tahl had told him. He had trouble concentrating on the whys of Tahl's kidnapping. There would be time for that, as soon as he looked into her face and saw that she was her old self again.

"The message runner could be the key," Obi-Wan mused. "We know the list was stolen and could have been in Absolute

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hands. What if Oleg took it? If Tahl was spotted escaping with him, they would of course suspect that she had it. Tahl said that the Absolute leaders wanted to interrogate Oleg. If they couldn't find him, they would turn to Tahl."

Qui-Gon was barely listening. "It is a theory, Padawan. We shall see. "

The doors slid open, and the med team emerged. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan stood. The doctor went straight to Qui-Gon.

"Her vital signs are dropping. We did everything we could do. The damage to her internal organs was severe. She will see you now."

Qui-Gon searched the doctor's face. "So she will recover."

"Her damage is severe," the doctor repeated. His weary eyes were full of sadness as he looked at Qui-Gon.

"She will recover," Qui-Gon repeated. This time there was certainty in his voice.

He strode past the doctor and hurried to the room where Tahl was kept. She lay in a diagnostic bed. He ignored the readouts and sensors. He took her hand, and she turned her head slowly toward him. He was relieved to see that the med team had removed the disguising lenses from her eyes. He had missed seeing Tahl's lovely green and gold eyes. Now the face he loved was before him, just as he had always known it. He knew every line and curve, every strong feature, every soft hollow.

He took her hand, but received no answering pressure. Qui-Gon ran his fingers down her bare arm to feel her skin. It was cold. So cold...

Her lips parted. He had to bend his head to hear her. "Wherever I am headed, I will wait for you, Qui-Gon. I've always been a solitary traveler. "

"Not anymore," he said. "Remember? We will go on together. You promised," he teased. "You can't back out now. I'll never let you forget it."

Her smile and the slight pressure of her fingers seemed to cost her a great effort. Panic shot through him.

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He brought his face close. He placed his forehead against hers. Her skin was so cool against his. He willed his own warmth and energy into her body. Of what benefit was his great strength, what was it good for, if it could not heal her? Qui-Gon called on everything he knew, everything he believed in – his connection to the Force, his great love for Tahl – to enter her and give her strength.

He felt a small sigh flutter against his cheek. Her fingers pressed his again. He knew that she had felt what he had tried to give her, and had received comfort from it. He had never felt so attuned to her, so close. If he could breathe for her, he would.

"Let my last moment be this one," she said. He felt her breath go in, then out, soft against his cheek. Then it did not resume.

Chapter Twenty

Obi-Wan sat, his head in his hands. Suddenly, he straightened. He felt a disturbance in the Force. Something had been sucked out of the air, a powerful energy collapsing, leaving a vacuum.

When he heard the cry from the other room, at first he did not know who could have made it.

Then he realized it had been his Master.

He heard running feet in the corridor outside the waiting room. The med team.

He dashed to the door and activated it, then followed the med team into Tahl's room.

Two of the team checked the monitoring equipment. The doctor stood by. He did nothing.

That was when Obi-Wan fully understood that Tahl was gone.

The med team stood back from the equipment. No one tried to move the large man bent over the body in the bed. His grief was too huge, too private.

Tahl's eyes were closed. Her hand rested in Qui-Gon's. A slight smile was still on her face. His forehead was pressed against hers. He did not move a muscle. He did not let go of her hand.

Obi-Wan was staggered by the pain he felt in that room. The very lines of Qui-Gon's body told him of an agony so immense

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he could not grasp it. The intimacy of Qui-Gon's posture, the way his forehead rested against Tahl's, suddenly told Obi-Wan that he had not begun to realize the depths of Qui-Gon's feelings.

With that knowledge, his heart broke for his Master.

He took a step closer. How could he help Qui-Gon? What could he do?

Qui-Gon turned. Obi-Wan saw a face that had changed. Something was gone or something was added, he did not know. But it was no longer the face he knew so well. Grief had marked it forever. Obi-Wan knew that in his bones.

He would have his own grief for Tahl. It would never match Qui-Gon's.

He approached the bed slowly. He had no words for this. Nothing he had learned at the Temple, nothing Qui-Gon had taught him, had prepared him for it.

He placed his hand on Qui-Gon's shoulder. "Let me help you, Master."

Qui-Gon's eyes were dead. "There is no help for me now."

Qui-Gon looked down at Tahl's lifeless body. His hand still clasped hers. "There is only revenge."

Book Sixteen
The Call to Vengeance

Chapter One

The light tubes in the large dwelling were powered down to half strength and set to a faint blue hue. The hallways were hushed and dim. Beyond a pair of opaque glass double doors, a single glass column stood, as tall as a human figure. It gave off a soft, steady glow.

Blue was the color of mourning on the planet of New Apsolon. Glass columns were used to commemorate those who had lost their lives to injustice. This slender shaft of pure light was for the Jedi Knight Tahl.

Manex, the brother of Roan, the late ruler of New Apsolon, had offered the Jedi his own home in which to mourn Tahl. Manex had tried to save Tahl by summoning the best med team in New Apsolon to treat her. When she had died, he had made the appropriate arrangements. He himself had gone to find the column of light to mark her spirit.

Obi-Wan Kenobi struggled to feel grateful. He did not trust Manex. He did not trust the man's great wealth or his character. Manex was not interested in anyone's well-being but his own. Why was he being so kind to the Jedi?

Obi-Wan wished he could talk to his Master about it. But Qui-Gon Jinn was unreachable. He had gone inside the room with Tahl and had remained there ever since.

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Obi-Wan sat on the floor outside. He had begun by standing, but exhaustion finally forced him to sit. He wanted to lie down, but he would remain upright as long as he could. It was the only thing he could think of to do for his Master.

The shock was wearing off, but Obi-Wan still had difficulty understanding that Tahl was gone. It meant looking ahead to a future that did not hold her spirit, her humor, and her fierce intelligence. There had been so many times that a kind word or a quick smile had restored him. Tahl knew his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, better than anyone else. She had helped Obi-Wan to understand Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan even suspected that she had played a role in bringing the two of them together after he had left the Jedi order. That had been a deep rift, hard to heal. Yet Obi-Wan had always taken great comfort from the feeling that Tahl wanted Qui-Gon to take him back. She had comprehended more clearly than anyone why he had done what he did. She knew he had truly learned an important lesson about his own character, and she wanted Qui-Gon to give him a second chance.

He had learned many things as a Jedi student – how to turn fear into purpose, how to deepen discipline into will. But how could he turn grief into acceptance? There could be no acceptance of this. Yet somehow he must keep going until he found it.

At first he had been filled with such pain that he could hardly think. Tahl had been kidnapped by Balog, the Chief Security Controller of the planet. He had drugged her and imprisoned her in a sensory deprivation device used for torturing political prisoners. She had been weak when they had released her. But Obi-Wan had felt certain that Tahl's great strength combined with her Jedi powers would save her. Never for one second had he considered the possibility that she would die.

Neither, he was sure, had his Master. When he had run into Tahl's room at the med center, he had seen Qui-Gon bent over Tahl's still body. He saw the sensors stream by in flat, crisp lines, showing that her vital signs were gone. Still Qui-Gon did not

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move. He held Tahl's hand and pressed his forehead against hers. Obi-Wan had not only seen his grief, he had felt it like a living shadow in the room. He realized at that moment that Qui-Gon's feelings for Tahl were deeper than friendship. They were as deep and complex as the man himself. Qui-Gon had loved her.

There was nothing Obi-Wan could do to help his Master now. Qui-Gon had not responded to his words or his presence. Obi-Wan desperately wished he were older than sixteen. Maybe with more maturity he would know how to comfort someone whose world had collapsed.

It hurt him to see Qui-Gon suffering. His Master had only left Tahl's room once, to rush out on a mysterious errand. He had tersely told Obi-Wan when he returned that he had managed to find two more probe droids. He had sent them to track down Balog. Now he would return to Tahl's side.

"Is there anything I can do, Master?" Obi-Wan had asked.

"Nothing," Qui-Gon had replied, and closed the door behind him.

Obi-Wan was used to silence between them. It was often a form of communication. He had come to understand that his Master was a man of few words. But this silence was different. He could not read it. Over and over the words Qui-Gon had spoken at Tahl's deathbed ran in his head: *There is no help for me now. There is only revenge.*

Revenge. Obi-Wan had never heard Qui-Gon use that word. It was not a concept the Jedi would ever endorse. *No revenge, only justice.* That creed was written on the heart of every Jedi. Revenge led to the dark side. It twisted the mind and crippled duty into something full of ego and darkness.

Was Qui-Gon battling the dark side inside himself? Balog had taken away what was most dear to him. He had done it in the most cruel way imaginable. He had drained Tahl minute by minute of her strength.

Had Qui-Gon sent out the probe droids in order to find Balog so that he could kill him?

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Obi-Wan pushed the thought away. He had to trust his Master. Qui-Gon would find the calm center he needed to proceed. They must find Balog, but in the interest of justice, not revenge.

If a Jedi died during a mission, the Jedi Council was supposed to be contacted immediately. Obi-Wan, in the first period of deep shock after Tahl's death, had roused himself to ask Qui-Gon about this. Qui-Gon had not answered. Obi-Wan could see how little procedure meant to Qui-Gon now. So the apprentice had been the one to contact the Jedi Council and inform them what had happened.

Yoda had been shocked and deeply distressed, for he had cared about Tahl, too. A Jedi team would be sent immediately. Over the course of the day, Obi-Wan had wondered who it would be. If they had left immediately and taken a fast ship, it wouldn't be long until they reached New Apsolon. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. A Jedi team would be reassuring... but would they notice that Qui-Gon was not acting like himself?

Manex appeared in the hall, and Obi-Wan scrambled to his feet.

"Has he come out?" Manex asked, his plump face creased in worry.

"Not for hours," Obi-Wan replied.

"Please let me know if I can be of service. I must go to the United Legislature. They've called for me. Things are very unsettled in the government right now. I will be back as soon as I can. I've given instructions to security to show your Jedi team in as soon as they arrive."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said.

Qui-Gon stepped into the hall seconds after Manex left.

"I heard voices," he said heavily.

"Manex has gone to the United Legislature," Obi-Wan said.

"Is there anything I can get you, Master?"

"No. Have the probe droids returned?"

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Obi-Wan shook his head. "I'll notify you as soon as they do, of course. But I think there are other things we can do to capture Balog, Master. We don't have to wait for the probe droids." He spoke hurriedly, before Qui-Gon could turn away and go back inside the room. During the long wait, Obi-Wan had been thinking about their next step. It was the only thing that pushed away the pain.

"Eritha is still staying with Alani in the Supreme Governor's Residence," he went on. "She is concealing the fact that she knows her sister is in league with the Absolutes, hoping to gain more information. She promised to be a spy for us. Alani might know where Balog is."

"So we must wait for that, too," Qui-Gon said.

"But we could investigate the tie between them," Obi-Wan pointed out. "How was the alliance formed? What does Alani expect from Balog? What does he want in return? Where did the Absolutes retreat to after their base was destroyed in the quarries? And what about the list of the Absolutes' secret informers? Balog doesn't have it, because he's looking for it. We know that the Worker Oleg might have had it before he disappeared." Obi-Wan swallowed. Qui-Gon's gaze went dim. The reason they knew that was because Tahl had told them. He pushed on.

"If we can find the list first, we can set a trap for Balog. And what about Manex? What reason does he have for being so kind to us? There are many leads to investigate. I'm sure there must be rumors swirling at the United Legislature. Some of them should be followed up on –"

"We are here to find Tahl's killer, not get involved in politics," Qui-Gon said sternly. "Our main object is the pursuit of Balog. As soon as we get information on him, I can leave."

"You mean we can leave," Obi-Wan amended, watching his Master carefully.

Neither one of them had heard the footsteps approaching.

"We came as soon as we could," a deep familiar voice said.

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Obi-Wan turned. The Jedi team had arrived. To his relief, he saw his good friend Bant. But his relief turned to disquiet when he saw the Jedi Master was next to her. It was Mace Windu.

Chapter Two

Mace Windu took only the most crucial missions now. His duties on the Jedi Council were many. Obi-Wan realized more fully how important the loss of Tahl was to the Jedi. He had been thinking of himself and Qui-Gon only, of the friend they had lost. But Tahl's influence ran much deeper and wider.

Mace gave both Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan a long, measured look. He seemed to capture their weariness and grief as well as the tension between them. Obi-Wan wondered how much of their discussion Mace had heard. He grew uncomfortable under that all-seeing glance.

He turned with relief to his friend Bant. They had gone through Temple training together, and she was the being he most relied on for her support and understanding. But there was something cool in the way Bant returned his regard. Obviously, she was upset. She had been Tahl's apprentice.

"We are sorry to be here under such tragic circumstances," Bant said to Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan even picked up a hint of coolness in her greeting to Qui-Gon. That was a bigger surprise. Bant revered Qui-Gon, and Qui-Gon had a special place in his heart for Obi-Wan's friend.

Qui-Gon did not seem to notice the change. He was too consumed by his own grief, Obi-Wan knew. He nodded at Bant.

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"Tahl is inside," he said.

"We will see her for a moment," Mace said. "Then I would like a briefing on where we stand."

Qui-Gon gave a heavy nod. Mace and Bant disappeared inside. They returned after a few minutes. Bant looked shaken. Mace closed the double doors behind them quietly and moved farther down the hall.

"This Chief Security Controller, Balog, was responsible," Mace said. "We know this for sure, yet we don't know where he is. Correct?"

Qui-Gon did not speak, so Obi-Wan said, "Yes."

"Tell me what happened," Mace said, his eyes on Obi-Wan. He seemed to understand that Qui-Gon did not want to talk. Qui-Gon's eyes were on the door to the room where Tahl was, as though only the slimmest whisper of respect was keeping him in the hall.

"Once we knew that Balog had captured Tahl, we obtained two probe droids to track him," Obi-Wan explained.

Mace frowned. "Aren't probe droids now illegal on this planet?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, swallowing. He was well aware that Jedi were not supposed to break laws on other worlds. "But you can buy them on the black market. It was our only chance to find Tahl. We had good reason to believe she would be in a sensory deprivation device, so we knew that the longer it took to find her, the more danger she would be in. The probe droids told us that Balog had struck out across open country and entered the quarry region of the planet. Eritha, one of the daughters of the late ruler, Ewane, followed us. She had discovered that her twin sister, Alani, was in league with the Absolutes. This was a shock, because both Eritha and Alani are Workers. When the Civilized were in power, they used the Absolutes for surveillance and torture of Workers – including Alani and Eritha's father."

"I know the Absolutes were the secret police of New Apsolon," Bant said hesitantly. "I didn't get a chance to be

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thoroughly briefed. Weren't they outlawed after Ewane was elected?"

"Yes. But the Workers suspect that the secret police never disbanded, " Obi-Wan said. "We discovered that they are right. But we never suspected Balog was in league with them. He's a Worker and was a protégé of Ewane. Now we know from Eritha that Alani arranged the kidnapping of herself and her sister to throw us off the track and gain public sympathy. At the same time, we believe it was a trick to lure Roan into the hands of the Absolutes. Roan was elected after Ewane was killed."

"Roan was a Civilized, not a Worker," Bant said.

"Right. But he had great sympathy for the Worker cause and worked closely with Ewane to bring about justice for all the people of New Apsolon. He even took in the twins when Ewane was murdered."

"And Alani betrayed him," Bant said slowly. "She must be very corrupt."

"We stumbled onto a village of Rock Workers while we were pursuing Balog," Obi-Wan went on. "Their entire village was destroyed in a raid, except for one Rock Worker, Yanci. She's the one who helped us find the secret headquarters of the Absolutes. That's how we rescued Tahl. But it was too late. Qui-Gon brought her back here, but the damage to her internal organs was too severe...."

"Balog killed her slowly," Qui-Gon said. His voice sounded hoarse and rusty.

"He escaped in an underwater aqua skimmer," Obi-Wan added. "He was impossible to track, and we needed to get Tahl to safety."

"And now?" Mace asked. "We see on the streets that there is unrest here. If Alani is planning some sort of takeover, it will be soon. Immediate pursuit of Balog is wise."

"That is what we think," Qui-Gon said.

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"Yet attention to the mission at hand will also bring results," Mace went on. "If Balog is now in hiding, we'll need to track him by his ambitions. Ambitions reveal direction."

"The Workers contacted me," Obi-Wan said. "They investigated all the file systems in the Absolute headquarters. Everything had been wiped clean. We don't have much to go on."

"We have our instincts," Mace said. He turned to Qui-Gon. "Is there a place we can speak alone, Qui-Gon?"

Reluctantly, Qui-Gon nodded. He turned and led the way down the hall.

As soon as they were alone, Obi-Wan turned to Bant. "I'm so sorry about Tahl," he said in a rush. "I know how you must feel..."

"I don't think so." Bant's tone was flat. She looked at him steadily with her large silver eyes. Mon Calamari had extraordinarily clear eyes, and Obi-Wan had always been able to read Bant's emotions. Now he was confused by the anger he saw there.

"Your sympathy comes too late," Bant continued. "How could you keep the fact that Tahl had been kidnapped from me, Obi-Wan? You know that you and Qui-Gon should have contacted the Temple immediately."

"I know," Obi-Wan said. "But so much happened so fast. Qui-Gon thought that more Jedi might endanger Tahl's life. We decided that if we couldn't rescue her in twenty-four hours, we would contact the Temple." Actually, it had been *Qui-Gon's* decision to wait. But Obi-Wan would take responsibility for it, too. He could have argued with Qui-Gon. He had not.

"That wasn't your decision to make," Bant interrupted. Her normally gentle voice was crisp with anger. "How would you feel if another Jedi team had done that to you, Obi-Wan? What if Qui-Gon had been kidnapped?"

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Obi-Wan felt shame wash over him. Qui-Gon had been kidnapped once, by the scientist Jenna Zan Arbor. If he hadn't been involved in Qui-Gon's rescue, he would have gone crazy.

"We didn't think it through," he admitted.

"I'll say," Bant said bitterly. She had never taken such a harsh tone with him. "Did you think of me at all, Obi-Wan?"

"Of course," Obi-Wan said. "I thought I would save you a day of worry. If we couldn't rescue Tahl, we would have called in a Jedi team."

"But you didn't rescue Tahl," Bant said evenly. "At least, not in time. Did you?"

Obi-Wan was stung. Bant had said nothing more than the terrible truth, but it wasn't like her to hurt him that way.

She seemed to realize how severely her words had wounded him. "She was my Master, Obi-Wan," she said in a slightly softer tone. "She needed me. I wasn't there. You can't imagine how that feels."

"No," he said quietly. "And I never would want to. I am truly sorry, Bant. You are right. We should have contacted you."

Bant nodded stiffly. Obi-Wan's actions had caused a rift in their friendship. He didn't know how deep that rift was, or how long it would last.

Tahl was dead. Qui-Gon was like a stranger. And now Obi-Wan's best friend had turned away from him.

He had never felt so alone.

Chapter Three

The last thing Qui-Gon wanted was a private talk with Mace Windu. He felt such a heaviness of spirit that it was all he could do to be courteous to the Jedi Master. The pain inside him ebbed and flowed like an unpredictable tide. Sometimes it reared up so fiercely that it tore at his insides like a beast.

Out of all the Jedi, why did Mace have to take this mission? There was a great deal of respect between the two Jedi, but Qui-Gon had never felt particularly close to his formidable colleague.

The door slid shut behind them. Even here in his private reception room, Manex had turned the lights to pale blue. It gave an eerie cast to the gleaming black stone that covered the walls and floors, and turned the bright vivid greens of the seating areas and lush pillows into a sickly hue.

"Do you wish to accompany Tahl's body back to the Temple?" Mace asked. "Bant, Obi-Wan, and I can remain here and conduct the mission."

Qui-Gon saw that Mace was trying to be kind. There was deep sympathy in his sober gaze. He felt a rush of relief that Mace did not inquire into his feelings, or ask if there had been something deeper than friendship between Qui-Gon and Tahl. Qui-Gon suspected that Mace already knew these things without words.

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Qui-Gon did not intend to give up the search for Tahl's killer. But he needed to be careful. He could not tell Mace that his need to find Balog was burning inside him. His anger might show in his voice or his face. Mace might think that the anger was not under control. He would not understand that despite his grief, Qui-Gon's control was complete.

It is because it has to be. It's the only way I can go on.

"Thank you for the offer," he said. "But I must continue the mission in order to honor Tahl's memory."

To Qui-Gon's relief, Mace nodded. He was not going to argue with him. Tahl would have. She always knew when he was trying to sidestep his own feelings. A fresh spurt of agony caused him to clench his hands together into fists by his side. If Mace noticed, he did not comment.

The light over the door flashed, then slid open partway. Manex's protocol droid, fashioned of highly polished black plastoid, hovered.

"Manex has returned and would like a word with the Jedi," it said.

Glad for the interruption, Qui-Gon turned. "Please tell him to come in."

A moment later the door opened wider and Manex entered, along with Obi-Wan and Bant.

"Excuse the interruption please," Manex said, running a hand through his cropped curly hair. For the first time, Qui-Gon noticed that it had begun to turn gray like his brother's. "I have just come from the United Legislature, and I have some news that I thought you needed to hear. I'm glad to see the new Jedi team has arrived."

"I am Mace Windu and this is Bant," Mace said.

Manex bowed his greeting. "I'm honored to have distinguished Jedi in my home. But I'm afraid that my news is not good. Information has been leaked to the Senators that Tahl was helping the Absolutes. There is a holotape of a meeting that she chaired in which she is discussing taking over the government."

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"Tahl was working undercover in order to expose the Absolutes," Obi-Wan explained.

"The Senators don't know what to believe," Manex said.

"How did this tape get circulated?" Mace asked.

"Balog," Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon said together.

"Obviously it's been leaked by him," Obi-Wan continued. "He needs to discredit the Jedi in order to prepare the way to return to power."

"It doesn't matter," Qui-Gon said. "We'll clear Tahl's name when we find Balog."

"If you can find him quickly," Manex said gravely. "My fear is that he will come to, power and we won't be able to charge him with anything. Do you know who is backing him? Whoever it is, he or she must be powerful."

"We are not certain of anything," Mace said. "The Jedi were not ready to confide in Manex. He knew nothing of Alani's treachery. He might even be an ally of hers."

"I have further news," Manex said. "I have been appointed Acting Supreme Governor until the elections are held. I haven't sought this position, nor do I want it. I'm a businessman, not a politician. But the Senators prevailed on my love of my planet and my desire for peace. They feel that Roan's brother has the best chance of holding the government together. No doubt the election period will be volatile. I've tightened security and closed the Absolute Museum. We are mainly trying to keep the people calm. And there's one more thing. As Acting Supreme Governor, I'm making an official request to the Jedi. I'd like you to oversee the preparations for the upcoming elections. We are holding them in three days. We can't afford to wait. It's the only way to keep the peace."

"But not everyone trusts the Jedi," Obi-Wan said. "I'm sure the Tahl holotape didn't help."

"There are enough who do," Manex said. "And once you find Balog, as you said, Tahl's name will be cleared. Until then, you'll

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have all my support. I've instructed World Security to give you cooperation."

Mace nodded. "Then we accept."

Qui-Gon bristled. Mace had not even glanced at him, or sought his opinion. He would have been against the acceptance.

"I'll leave you, then," Manex said. He rushed out, his gold robe swirling around his soft, polished boots.

Qui-Gon knew he should speak diplomatically, but he didn't have time for tact. "This is a mistake," he told Mace. "Overseeing elections will divert us from the investigation of Tahl's death. We should be concentrating on finding Balog."

Mace took Qui-Gon's stern tone in stride. "I disagree," he said. "The political situation is part of the pursuit of justice for Tahl's killer. It is all tied together. We will be in the perfect position to gain information. Not to mention that our overall mission was to restore New Apsolon to stability. If the Supreme Governor requests our help in a legitimate cause, the Jedi must agree."

Qui-Gon pressed his lips together. He knew better than to push the argument further. But he was furious at Mace's decision. He wanted to stalk out of the room, out of the house, and keep going. He wanted to push an airspeeder as fast as he could, even without a direction. Frustration boiled inside him. With every second that ticked away, he could feel Balog slipping out of his reach.

Chapter Four

"I suggest that we find our quarters and take some refreshment," Mace said, turning to Bant. "We had a long journey, and we don't know when we'll get a chance to rest. Then we'll head to the United Legislature and get started."

Obi-Wan had felt Qui-Gon's displeasure with Mace's decision. It was clear how deeply he disagreed with Mace. Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon saw this as a waste of time. But his Master had not come up with an alternative plan, either.

Mace lifted an eyebrow at Qui-Gon. "If you had an idea of Balog's whereabouts, or a way to find him, we would delay and follow your lead. But until then, the only course open to us is to gather information."

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon. His Master had not told Mace about the probe droids he'd sent out to find Balog. It was one thing to break the laws of a planet because a Jedi was in immediate danger of death. It was another to employ them in tracking a citizen of the planet where they were illegal. He wasn't sure how Mace would react, which was most likely why Qui-Gon did not tell him. The Jedi were already on uncertain footing on the planet.

Mace and Bant left the room. The tension did not dissolve. Qui-Gon paced, brooding. Clearly, he did not want to talk.

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Manex's protocol droid once again hovered in the doorway. "So sorry to intrude. Another visitor. She says you know her, so I took the liberty. Her name is Yanci."

"Yanci? Show her in, please," Obi-Wan said, surprise in his voice. Yanci was the Rock Worker medic who had fixed his leg after a rock had crushed it. She had come after them and begged for their help in resisting an Absolute attack on their settlement. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had returned with her, but it was too late. Every man, woman, and child had been killed. Yanci's terrible grief still burned in Obi-Wan's memory.

Yanci entered the room. Obi-Wan could see at once that she had changed in the course of two days. The massacre of her fellow Workers along with the death of the man she loved had etched sorrow into her features. Her eyes were different. He could see the loss there.

For the first time since Tahl's death, Qui-Gon's distraction lifted and he truly seemed to focus on another person. It was as though the two recognized each other immediately as fellow sufferers. He moved forward and took her hand. "It is good to see you," he murmured.

She stared into his face. "I heard about Jedi Knight Tahl. You have my deepest sympathy."

He pressed her hand, then dropped it. Obi-Wan saw that Qui-Gon did not need words with Yanci.

She turned to Obi-Wan. "And how is that leg?"

"All healed, thanks to you."

"And you. I have great respect for the Jedi powers of recuperation. I am sorry to come at such a time. I'm living with the Workers in the city now." Yanci's voice lowered. "I heard something that I thought might help you. It is about a Worker named Oleg."

Obi-Wan's senses sharpened. Oleg was the Worker who they believed had the list of Absolute informers. He had been seen with Tahl, which was why Balog suspected that he had passed off the list to her. Instead, he had disappeared.

Jude Watson

"I heard that Balog is chasing Oleg," Yanci went on. "I don't know why, and I don't need to know. But I recognized that name. Several weeks ago, the Rock Workers were contacted by the Workers in the city. They asked if they could send a Worker to us who needed to go into hiding. It was Oleg. He had infiltrated the Absolutes and needed a place to hide once his mission was completed. They weren't sure when he would be coming. We agreed, of course. Later we got word that his cover had been blown and that he was being sent immediately. But he never showed up. We were concerned and searched the quarries, but we don't think he ever left the city. Then we ourselves were attacked. As you know."

"Thank you for coming to us," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan could hear the disappointment in his voice. He felt disappointed as well. The information was interesting, but not very helpful. It didn't lead them any closer to Balog.

"But that is not all I have come to tell you," Yanci said. "There was a reason the Workers were sending him to us. They knew that I had training in a specific medical condition that Oleg has. He got it as a result of being imprisoned by the Absolutes years ago. It's a form of hibernation sickness that recurs regularly, requiring treatment. I happen to be able to provide treatment because several of our Rock Workers had the same syndrome. But there are only a few med clinics in the city that can treat it. So I thought... I thought it would be a way to track Oleg, if you were looking for him. It could be a way to find Balog."

Yanci reached inside her cloak and took out a durasheet. She handed it to Qui-Gon. "Here is a list of the clinics."

Obi-Wan felt his spirits rise. If they could track Oleg, no doubt they would find Balog. Qui-Gon appeared frozen, transfixed by the list in his hand.

"Do you think it could be helpful?" Yanci asked. "Yes," Qui-Gon said. "Very."

Qui-Gon clutched the list, staring at it so fiercely that Yanci glanced at Obi-Wan, concerned.

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Obi-Wan moved forward to thank her. "This will help us," he told Yanci. "Thank you for coming. I'll see you out."

He walked her to the front door and bid her good-bye. He hurried back down the hall to Qui-Gon, eager to discuss their next step.

But when he opened the door to the sitting room, his Master had disappeared.

Chapter Five

Qui-Gon knew he should not have left Manex's residence without telling Obi-Wan or Mace where he was going, but he did not regret it. More talk meant more delay. If he had taken Obi-Wan with him, he would have put his Padawan in a bad position. If Qui-Gon was going to have conflicts with Mace Windu, he did not want Obi-Wan to be involved in them.

And, truth be told, his instincts told him that he needed to do this alone. Four Jedi equaled four opinions, more talk, more discussion. He didn't have the time. If he were going to find Balog, he had to move fast.

His comlink signaled. It was the third time in an hour. He knew it was Obi-Wan. He could feel that his Padawan wanted urgently to speak with him. Qui-Gon hesitated and then shut his comlink off. He would contact Obi-Wan when he had hard information. His Padawan would understand, he hoped.

Yanci's information could be useless. It wouldn't take him long to check out four clinics. In the meantime, Mace could go to the United Legislature and talk all he wanted.

So far he had been to three clinics. Oleg was not listed on the roster of patients. Of course, Oleg could have used an assumed name, but that would be hard to do. Medical treatment was free on New Apsolon, and records were kept on all citizens who

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needed treatment. The records were accessed by retinal scan. When Oleg needed treatment, the clinic would need his records in order to treat him. No doubt he would have to take the chance and use his own name.

Qui-Gon approached the last clinic on the outskirts of the Civilized Sector. So far it had been easy to determine whether or not Oleg had been a patient at a clinic. Qui-Gon had been able to bluff or charm his way into getting the information out of the clerks. The clinics were not run on high security. He expected the last one to be easy as well. Soon, if he was lucky, Balog could be within his grasp. His hopes rose as he strode toward the entrance.

A woman stood outside, hesitating. Qui-Gon moved forward to open the door, then saw that she was blind. He stopped and watched as she reached out, searching for the door access panel.

How many times had Tahl snapped at him to let her do something herself? He had learned to let her pour the tea, access a datafile, lead the way to the lake.

I can't bear it when you hover, she would say. I know I'm blind, but I still have a sense of direction.

Even the smallest memories of Tahl brought him such great pain. Maybe the small memories were the worst. It was thousands of such small memories that made up their long friendship. For the rest of his life, they would swim to the surface of his consciousness. He would remember things about her he had forgotten. Each time would be agony.

"To your left," Qui-Gon said politely.

"Thank you," she murmured.

The woman reached for the door access panel and pushed the signal. The door slid open. She moved through and proceeded to the desk, which was straight ahead. Qui-Gon could now see that she was using a laser sensor device to guide her movements. As a Jedi, Tahl had decided to rely on her other senses so that she would not have to depend on such technology.

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The woman spoke briefly to the clerk, who directed her in a loud, careful voice to a seat. Looking at the clerk's thin-faced, haughty expression, Qui-Gon sensed he would have trouble. He glanced at the clerk's name plate and walked forward.

"Good day, Vero," he said. "I'm hoping you can help me. My nephew Oleg is missing. I think he's a patient here. It would help if I knew – "

Vero interrupted him immediately. "No release of any med information without the proper authorization."

"I appreciate your attention to the rules," Qui-Gon said. "However – "

"No exceptions." Vero turned away. He barked out the name of the next patient, ignoring Qui-Gon.

This was certainly a different experience. In the other clinics, he'd found sympathetic clerks who had listened to his story and tried to help him. Qui-Gon could have used the Force on Vero, but he knew that everyone in the clinic was listening. If the rude Vero suddenly changed his approach, they would think it odd. Still, he wasn't about to walk away without finding out what he needed to know.

Suddenly a loud clatter came from behind him. The blind woman had upset her chair, then the one next to her. She began to try to right them, getting in the way of another patient. An argument began.

"Stop, stop! This is a clinic! What are you doing? Don't touch that! Don't move!" Vero hurried around the counter, upset at the commotion.

With a keen gaze, Qui-Gon saw the woman deliberately upset a flower vase.

"Not my ginkas!" Vero screamed, diving for the flowers.

She was doing it for him, Qui-Gon knew. She was giving him a little time.

He reached over the counter and swiveled Vero's datascreen to face him. Quickly, he clicked in Oleg's name. To his relief, his

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records showed up. Oleg had given an address close to the clinic. His next appointment was in two weeks.

Qui-Gon quickly swiveled the datascreen back into position. He walked past Vero, who was picking up flowers and scolding the woman for upsetting them. Qui-Gon righted a chair and gave a hand to the woman to help her sit down. He bent close to her ear. "Thanks for your help."

"You know when to give help, and when not to," she said. "That's rare."

"I had a good teacher."

Qui-Gon walked out quickly. The door slid shut behind him, sealing off the commotion. He had memorized the address and remembered the street, which he'd passed on the way to the clinic. Qui-Gon quickly made his way there.

The address was a small hotel. Qui-Gon asked for Oleg and was told he had checked out, but to try the café around the corner. A bit surprised that Oleg was not more discreet, Qui-Gon headed to the café.

The owner was wiping down tables in the front. Qui-Gon asked for Oleg and was directed to a table in the rear.

A slight, blond man sat at the table, his hands curled around a cup of juice. Qui-Gon sat down opposite him.

"It's about time," Oleg said nervously. "I've put myself in danger every minute."

"I got here as soon as I could," Qui-Gon said. Obviously, Oleg had been waiting for someone he did not know. That explained why he hadn't bothered to use an assumed name. It was just as apparent to Qui-Gon that this young man was not used to dealing with danger. His head constantly swiveled, looking for trouble. Anyone looking for him would have picked him out immediately.

"I have the file," Oleg said. "It's not on me, but it's not far. But I'm warning you, if you try anything, I'm prepared to shoot. I have to up the price."

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"Why?" Qui-Gon asked. He would play this out. He assumed, of course, that Oleg was talking about the list. He didn't want to buy it from him. If Oleg still had it, that meant that Balog didn't.

"I have to leave the planet," Oleg said, wiping his wet forehead with his napkin. "Do you think this is easy? Too many people are searching for me now."

"I might be able to come up with more," Qui-Gon said.

"Decide now," Oleg snapped. "I have no time to waste." His comlink signaled, and he listened for a moment. With his eyes on Qui-Gon, he replied, "Yes, that's right. I still have it. Will you meet my price? Good. I'll meet you there, then. Can't you make it earlier? All right."

He shut off the comlink. "There are others who will pay, as you see," he said. "I made an appointment, but you can buy it first. So decide. It's now or never."

"Never," Qui-Gon said. "The price is just too high. Sorry." He stood.

Oleg looked even more nervous. "Listen, I don't have to sell to this guy. I don't like him. He's an Absolute, and I hate them. They ruined my health. I'd rather the list end up with a Worker, believe me. I look like a traitor, but I'm just looking out for myself. Maybe we can negotiate."

"Sorry," Qui-Gon said again. He turned and left the café. He positioned himself out of sight of Oleg, but was able to see him through the reflection of the café window. Was the bidder on the comlink Balog? He had a strong feeling it was. Oleg had broken out into a sweat. And he had said he didn't want the list in the hands of the Absolutes.

Qui-Gon was close now. He could feel it. All his concentration was centered on that slight, nervous man in the café. The anger and grief he had compressed into a burning ball inside him threatened to flame up, and he tamped it down. Patience, he chided himself. Balog would be his very soon.

Chapter Six

Qui-Gon did not think it possible that a being could nurse a glass of juice as long as Oleg. He did not seem to notice the surly stare of the café owner, or the press of customers who came in, looking for a table as the café grew crowded.

Qui-Gon began to feel conspicuous, so he moved down the alley to another window. After a few minutes he moved to the back, where he could see the interior through a small, grimy window. He kept up his post there, pretending to loiter until people began to come home from work and windows lit up across the alley. Qui-Gon headed back to the front and crossed the street. He stationed himself at a juice bar with a good angle on the front of the cafe. Dusk fell. His patience wore thin. Was the conversation a bluff? Had Oleg merely been trying to get Qui-Gon to meet his price?

Qui-Gon was beginning to consider approaching Oleg again when he saw him head out of the cafe, glancing nervously over his shoulder. Qui-Gon joined the stream of people on the walkway and followed him.

At first, it was easy to keep Oleg in sight. The people on the streets were good cover. But as Oleg crossed over into the Worker Sector, the crowd grew larger. Oleg was a slight young

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man, and he soon got lost in the crowd. It was difficult to keep him in sight without running into him.

Gradually, Qui-Gon became aware that he was not the only one tailing Oleg. He did not turn his head or alter his stride in any way, but he threw his attention around him like a net. Someone was tailing Oleg from across the street.

It was Balog. He saw him reflected in the shiny surface of an approaching landspeeder. He recognized the stocky frame, the way the muscular legs seemed to power the body forward like a machine, not a man.

Qui-Gon did not know if Balog had seen him. Perhaps his focus was on Oleg. If he was lucky, that would be the case. But he could not rely on luck. His heart began to pound, and he had to discipline himself to keep his focus. He wanted to turn and rush at Balog in a full-scale attack. He wanted to make him pay for every breath

Tahl had struggled to take, every second her life systems slowly failed. He would make each moment of Balog's suffering an eternity....

Where did that thought come from? The ferocity of it shocked him. It had risen from the depths of him. It sounded like vengeance. He did not know such an emotion could exist inside him. The knowledge made him uneasy.

I can control it. It will not take me over. I can capture Balog and not let my anger overtake me.

He said the words to himself, just the way he would have said them to Obi-Wan. He was a Jedi. His training would keep him on the right path. It had to.

His hands trembled, and he clasped them together for a moment. *Help me, Tahl*, he said fervently. He had never said such a thing to her when she was alive, though now he realized how many times he had gone to her for help. She had known that it was hard for him to ask for it. It was the one thing she had never teased him about. Instead, she had simply given him whatever he needed: information, assurance, compassion.

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To his left, Balog speeded up. Qui-Gon melted back. Now he must keep both Balog and Oleg in sight.

Oleg entered a warehouse. Balog hurried down an alley to the side of the building. There was no question in Qui-Gon's mind which one to pursue. He headed down the alley after Balog.

When he got to the back, he found himself in a small fenced area. It was empty. All the windows looking out from the warehouse were dark. Qui-Gon tried the door. It was locked.

It was a flicker in the corner of his eye that alerted him, nothing more. But it was enough. He was already turning and had his lightsaber activated when the first probe droid attacked. Blaster fire pinged by his ear. He felt the scorch near his shoulder. He reached up to bring it down with a swipe, but it veered off.

Blaster fire to his left, then to his right. Behind him, Qui-Gon counted seven droids, now in attack mode. Their sensors glowed red as they pinpointed his location. Blaster fire rained around him like a cage. It was almost impossible to dodge it.

Qui-Gon ran at the wire fence. He shifted his body horizontally, calling on the Force to help him scale it without using his hands. His balance was perfect as he hit the top. He gave a backward leap and took two probe droids out with one single downward stroke.

Before he hit the ground, he twisted in midair to land a few centimeters away, confusing the probe droid that fired at the spot where he should have landed. He ran at the warehouse wall now, straight up, and then flipped backward, swiping a glancing blow at the third droid. It buzzed, blaster fire erupting in a series of flashes. Then it began to smoke, spiraling down until it crashed.

Qui-Gon fought in a frenzy, mindful that Balog was inside that warehouse. The probe droids were slowing him down, and frustration boiled inside him at their insistent buzzing.

He attacked with a new ferocity. He launched himself off the fence, kicking out with one leg to send one droid flying while thrusting a blow straight into the heart of another. It gave an

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anguished squawk and fell to the ground at top speed, crashing and bursting into flames.

Qui-Gon hit the ground, lightsaber held high, ready for the next challenge. But to his surprise, the remaining two probe droids suddenly wheeled away and flew off into the darkness.

He didn't hesitate a moment. He cut a hole in the locked door with his lightsaber and charged through. He ran down the corridor, searching room after room. The rooms were filled with tools, equipment, and durasteel bins. He found nothing until he ran into a small room near the turbolift.

There was Oleg, lying on the floor, arms outstretched, mouth open. He had a surprised expression on his face. But he would never feel surprised again.

Chapter Seven

Mace had not shown any emotion when Obi-Wan gave him the news of Qui-Gon's disappearance. He had simply nodded. "We will hear from him, I'm sure," he had said.

But when they discovered that Qui-Gon had switched off his comlink, Mace's disapproval was obvious.

"We must proceed without Qui-Gon," he said. "I think we should split up. I'll go to the United Legislature and gather information. Obi-Wan, can you find this medic, Yanci? We need another copy of that list."

"I think so," Obi-Wan said. "She said she was staying with the Workers, and I can trace her through Irini and Lenz."

"Good. Then you and Bant must find her and join Qui-Gon in tracking Oleg. No doubt you could run into Qui-Gon at the same time. As soon as you find either Oleg or Qui-Gon, contact me."

Obi-Wan nodded. Mace left them, hurrying out of Manex's residence and striding down the street. Some of the passersby glared at him, seeing his Jedi robes. No doubt they had heard the rumors being spread of Jedi treachery. Obi-Wan was certain Mace noticed this, but he walked on with no hesitation visible in his stride or expression.

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"Where are we headed?" Bant asked. There was a new crispness in her voice.

"The Worker Sector," Obi-Wan said. "We can catch a public transport this way."

As they walked, Obi-Wan thought he could not bear it if they weren't able to be friends again. He needed things to be open and easy with Bant. With Qui-Gon gone, things were so confused. He was worried about the reason Qui-Gon left without him. Was Qui-Gon driven by vengeance? Was that why he hadn't wanted Obi-Wan along?

Obi-Wan missed his Master. It was hard to have to miss his friend, too. Especially when she walked beside him.

They swung aboard an almost empty airbus. Obi-Wan looked out at the streets as they passed, hoping to catch a glimpse of his Master.

"He's out there somewhere," he said. He didn't know if Bant was speaking to him, but he was so in the habit of confiding in her that the words tumbled out before he could stop them. "And I don't know what he's thinking or planning. He could be walking into danger. He could need me. If anything happens..."

Bant turned cool silver eyes on him. "If anything happens to your Master, you'll feel as I do." She turned her face forward again.

Obi-Wan felt as though she had slapped him. Of course she was right.

What was there to say? He had already apologized. He felt sincerely sorry he had not considered Bant's feelings. The only thing he could do was agree.

"Yes," he said. "Then I'd know exactly how you feel."

It was rare on a mission when something went exactly the way it should. Yet this time, luck was with them. Obi-Wan remembered exactly where he and Qui-Gon had gone to meet Lenz. It had only been a few days before, but it felt like a lifetime

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ago. Luckily Lenz was still living in the same quarters. He usually moved often to escape the surveillance of the new Absolutes.

Lenz willingly gave them the address where Yanci was staying a short distance away. Yanci greeted Obi-Wan with tired affection and printed out a copy of the list on a durasheet. They were back on the street and heading for the address of the first med clinic in a short period of time.

They had no trouble with the first three clinics. The clerks freely told them that Oleg was not a patient. But the fourth clinic was staffed by an arrogant clerk named Vero. Puffed up with self-importance, he refused to give out any information.

"I don't know what med clinics do in the Worker Sector," he said haughtily, "but here, we are Civilized, and take our jobs seriously." He eyed Bant with disdain. "Obviously, you are new here. On your planet, things are no doubt more primitive. You might not be familiar with our procedures."

Bant's skin flushed pink with anger. "Listen, you – "

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said quickly, pulling Bant away from the desk.

"Getting into a confrontation isn't going to help," he whispered to her. "We'll have to think of another way."

Bant eyed the clerk. "How about lightsabers? Is that *primitive* enough for him?"

Obi-Wan grinned. Bant was the most gentle creature he knew, but she had her limits. "He's probably never seen a Mon Calamari before," he said. "New Apsolon doesn't get many tourists. There are plenty of good Civilized, but I'm sure there are plenty of ones like Vero, too."

"How are you at using the Force to affect his mind?" Bant asked, frowning. "I don't know if I could manage it. Vero is stupid, but he seems stubborn."

Obi-Wan doubted that he would be successful, either. "And the waiting room is so small – everyone would overhear," he murmured.

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Bant's silver gaze roved over the group. "Everyone is staring at us. "

"They've probably never seen a Mon Calamari before, either," Obi-Wan pointed out.

Something sparked in Bant's eyes. "That gives me an idea."

Suddenly, she weaved and began to gasp. "I'm over my limit," she said. "Help me. I need water."

Obi-Wan supported her as she slumped over. "Water!" she cried.

Vero looked over at them, his expression a mix of irritation and alarm. "What is it? The medics are busy."

"She's a Mon Calamari," Obi-Wan said frantically. "She can't stay out of water for more than four hours. We need to immerse her, now!"

"I can't authorize that," Vero said, shaking his head. "She'll just have to wait"

"She'll die!" Obi-Wan cried. Bant cooperated by slumping down even farther.

"I've heard about Mon Calamari," someone spoke up from the waiting area. "What he says is true."

"This will be on your record!" Obi-Wan warned Vero. He'd nearly said *conscience*, but he wasn't sure if Vero had one. "Do you want that?"

At the mention of his record, Vero looked alarmed. "All right, all right," he said. "There's an immersion tub in back. I'll take her."

Obi-Wan handed Bant over to Vero, who took her arm with distaste. He half dragged her back toward the med cubicles.

Obi-Wan wasted no time. He moved stealth-fully to the desk and quickly accessed the holofiles.

Yes! Oleg had been here, just a few days before. And there was an address listed. Obi-Wan quickly memorized it, then hurried back. He slid into a seat in the waiting area just as Vero returned.

"Your – friend is having her swim," Vero said with a frown.

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Bant emerged a few minutes later, still damp. Obi-Wan nodded at her to let her know he had succeeded. Quickly, they left the clinic and headed for a street map kiosk on a nearby corner. They pinpointed the address. It was only a few blocks away. The address was for a small hotel, but their search ended when they discovered that Oleg had checked out.

"Too many questions about that one," the owner of the hotel said darkly. "And I've got no answers for you."

Disappointed, Obi-Wan stopped on the walkway outside. He had a feeling that Qui-Gon had not given up so easily.

"I guess we could stake the place out," Bant said dubiously. "Or stake out the clinic."

"His next appointment isn't for two weeks," Obi-Wan said, discouraged.

"Well, let's contact Mace and tell him it's a dead end," Bant suggested.

Obi-Wan wasn't thrilled at giving Mace that news, but he reached for his comlink.

When Mace answered, he quickly explained the steps they had taken and where they were.

Mace sounded odd. "Give me your location again." When Obi-Wan repeated it, there was a long pause. "I've just received word that a body was found nearby. Meet me there. I am leaving now." Mace gave Obi-Wan the address and signed off.

Obi-Wan looked over at Bant. He knew what they both feared. He could not speak the fear aloud, but it rose inside him, draining him of strength. The body was Qui-Gon.

Without a word, they turned and ran toward the address Mace had given them. It was only a few blocks away.

They stopped in front of a warehouse. Security vehicles were parked outside, and officers walked in and out.

Obi-Wan strode forward as if he belonged there. He couldn't wait another second.

"We are Jedi. Manex has given us the authority to investigate," he said firmly.

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To his surprise, the security officer waved them inside. Manex must have followed through and demanded access for the Jedi.

The body lay under a tarp in the hallway. Obi-Wan felt relief drain the remaining strength from his muscles. He could already tell from the outlines that the body was too short and slight to be Qui-Gon's.

He bent over and lifted a corner of the tarp anyway. Mild blue eyes stared up at him in surprise. No matter how many times Obi-Wan had seen it, he never got used to death.

He guessed who the young man was. "Do you have an ID?" he asked a nearby officer.

"Name was Oleg," the officer replied as he entered something into a datapad.

"Was anything on the body?" Bant asked. "Just a blaster. Never got a chance to use it, did he? A probe droid got him first."

While they waited for Mace, Obi-Wan and Bant explored the area. At first they found nothing to indicate a struggle, no clues to send them in a new direction. Then they came to the back door. The panel was peeled back, leaving an opening wide enough for a man to step through.

Mace's voice came from behind them. "A light-saber, no doubt."

"It could have been a vibrotorch," Obi-Wan suggested. Suddenly he did not want Mace to think that Qui-Gon had been there.

Mace didn't answer. His eyes narrowed, and he moved forward to pluck something off the sharp end of a broken hinge. He held it up to Obi-Wan and Bent. It was a piece of a Jedi robe.

He turned and looked through the opening cut in the door. The security officers had left bright glow rods to illuminate the back area.

"There was a battle with probe droids," Mace said. "See the scorch marks on the pavement? Maybe four or five or even

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more." He turned to Obi- Wan. "Did Qui-Gon employ probe droids to track Balog?"

Obi-Wan swallowed. He could not lie to Mace. "Yes," he said.

Mace stood holding the scrap of fabric. His face showed nothing of what he was thinking. But Obi-Wan could guess.

Was Qui-Gon involved in Oleg's death? Had his grief and rage turned him to the dark side? Would he not care who was in his way in his quest to avenge Tahl's death? Obi-Wan feared the question was in Mace's mind. His bigger worry was that it was in his own.

Chapter Eight

Qui-Gon moved swiftly through the dark streets. The clue he had found at the site of Oleg's killing led him on. By Oleg's side, he had found a slender chain and pendant. The chain had been broken. He had recognized the pendant immediately. Irini had been at the warehouse.

He stood for a moment outside Lenz's dwelling, wondering how to proceed. Irini did not volunteer information freely. But his impatience allowed no time for persuasion.

Then he saw Irini heading toward him, her arms filled with a bag of food. Her steps slowed for an instant when she saw Qui-Gon. Then she moved forward briskly to hide her hesitation. In that moment, Qui-Gon decided that his best chance was to bluff.

"So we meet again tonight," he said.

She eyed him warily. "Again?"

"You were at the warehouse tonight with Oleg. So was I."

She swallowed. Her eyes narrowed. "What do you want?"

"Did you get the list?"

She let out a breath. "No. He didn't have it. I posed as a buyer, hoping to get it. If not, I wanted to protect him."

"But he betrayed the Workers," Qui-Gon said.

"He saw a way to make his fortune, yes," Irini said wearily.

"Many Workers are desperate that way. Despite our hopes, the

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wealth of the Civilized has not trickled down to us. But Oleg is still a Worker, and we know he was being pursued. My job was to bring him in."

"Did you see what happened?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Two probe droids attacked, so I got out," she said. "I'm sure it was Balog who sent them."

"Balog was there, too," Qui-Gon said. "I saw him."

Irini dropped the bundle she held. Fruit and protein packs spilled onto the pavement. "Balog was there? Did he get the list?"

"You said Oleg didn't have it," Qui-Gon said.

She shook her head rapidly, suddenly concerned. "I didn't see it. But maybe I overlooked something..."

"I don't think Oleg had the list on him," Qui-Gon said. "He was worried about his safety. I also think it's possible that he'd already sold it."

"Then why would he meet another buyer?" Irini asked.

"As you say, he wanted his fortune," Qui-Gon said. "He could sell the list several times and make enough to live out the rest of his life in luxury."

Irini pressed a hand against her eyes. "So several people could have the list, then. I hadn't thought of that."

"The question is: *who*?" Qui-Gon said. "And if Balog does have it, what is his next move?"

"I can't answer those questions. I'm as much in the dark as you are." Irini bent down and began to retrieve her food. Qui-Gon bent to help her.

"We are after the same thing, Irini," he said, placing a package of tea into her bag. "It might be a good idea if you helped me."

Suddenly a look of sadness came over Irini's usually impassive face. "I would if I could," she said. "I have to get these to Lenz now." Then, cradling the package in her arms, she walked off.

Qui-Gon contemplated his next move. It was hard to keep his mind clear. He felt as though he were stumbling around in the dark. So much of his pursuit of Balog was based on guesswork.

But it was all he had.

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The list was still the key. Even if Balog had it, his next move would be to consolidate his power. If Oleg had already sold it, who would be in the market to buy it?

The answer was easy. New elections were about to be held. Those who would benefit most by the list, or be the most threatened by it, would be politicians. A Legislator who held that list would hold great power.

He hated to admit it, but Mace had been right. He needed to go to the United Legislature. It was night now; he wouldn't have much luck finding Legislators. But surely there was something he could accomplish. Qui-Gon turned and headed back to the Civilized Sector.

Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan and Bant stood outside the Luster, an opulent café near the United Legislature building. Inside under the great domed lamps they could see the elite Civilized at polished tables, laughing, eating, and talking, their heads together in government gossip. Chairs were drawn up at already crowded tables, making it difficult to move around the room, but no one seemed to mind.

Mace was somewhere inside, trying to gather information. He had said that the two could wait in more comfortable quarters at Manex's residence, but neither Obi-Wan nor Bant wanted to leave. There was a feeling of urgency, as though every moment counted.

Bant stood, her arms folded, her eyes on the brilliantly lit café. Obi-Wan wondered how to start a conversation. Suddenly, after years of talking to Bant about everything that was on his mind, he had to struggle to find something to say.

Bant held her slight body rigid. Her stare was as fierce as Mace's. Her stiffness and concentration made it even harder for him to break the silence.

Then he noticed that she was not as contained as she appeared. Her hands were gripped together tightly. He realized

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that far from being lost in concentration, Bant was struggling to maintain her composure.

When he looked closer, he saw that her eyes were full of tears. She was struggling to keep them from falling.

"Bant." He said her name gently. He didn't know what else to say.

"She should be here," Bant said in a choked voice. "It seems impossible that she's not here. I can't believe she won't come around the corner any second. I keep hearing her scold us for making such a big fuss and coming here to save her." The tears tumbled down her face. "It hurts so much, Obi-Wan. I can't find peace in her death. I know I'm supposed to accept it. I can't."

It was the longest flood of words she had spoken since she'd arrived. Obi-Wan realized that Bant had said all the things he had been feeling. It *did* seem impossible that Tahl was dead. He knew that part of him hadn't absorbed it.

He knew that he was focusing on his worries about Qui-Gon so that he wouldn't have to.

"I know what you mean," he said. "When we found her, and she was so weak, I never for one moment thought she could die. Tahl was so strong. She was as strong as Qui-Gon."

"Did she say anything?" Bant asked timidly. "Anything before..."

"She was too weak to talk when I saw her," Obi-Wan said. "Qui-Gon was with her when she died."

"I'm glad such a good friend was there," Bant said.

Obi-Wan hesitated. He did not know whether he should speak. But didn't he owe Bant his confidence? Maybe it would help to close the gap between them.

"I think Qui-Gon and Tahl had become more than friends," he told her. "Here on New Apsolon, something changed. That's why Qui-Gon is grieving the way he is."

Bant turned, surprised. "You mean they loved each other?"

Obi-Wan nodded.

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Bant looked down at her clasped hands. "Then it is even more sad, isn't it?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "It's the saddest thing I've ever seen. That's why I'm worried about Qui-Gon."

Bant reached out and squeezed his arm. Obi-Wan was happy to feel the spontaneous gesture. "We will help him, Obi-Wan," she promised. And for the first time, Obi-Wan felt that maybe they could.

Just then Mace emerged from the café, his robe swirling around his ankles. He crossed the road and came up to them.

"I haven't learned much," he admitted. "But I did pick up an item of interesting gossip as I was leaving. Just today Legislator Pleni has announced that she will run for Supreme Governor. She has kept a low profile in the Legislature, so this was surprising. In just an afternoon, she managed to sway some powerful Legislators to support her."

Mace saw the look of puzzlement on the faces of Bant and Obi-Wan. "Her sudden bid for power and the quick support she received could mean that she bought the list from Oleg," he told them. "At any rate, it is worth investigating." Mace gathered his cloak around him. "If she has the list, she could be in danger. Whoever has possession of it could end up like Oleg. Come. Her residence is not far."

Mace's long stride covered more distance than Obi-Wan could make at a slow run. He and Bant had to jog to keep up with him.

Legislator Pleni lived alone in a small, elegant dwelling made of the gray stone that so much of New Apsolon was built with. All the lights inside the house were on. Mace pressed the illuminated bar that would alert her that she had visitors. They waited by the panel to announce themselves, but there was no answer.

"She could have left the lights on when she went out," Mace said. "But let's explore just the same."

The look on his face was uneasy. Mace had a deep connection to the Force. Obi-Wan had felt nothing, but now he focused his

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attention on the Force, reaching out around him. He did not pick up anything.

They walked around the perimeter of the dwelling. Mace seemed to grow more worried as they walked. When they reached the back, Obi-Wan felt it, too – a disturbance in the Force. He glanced at Mace, who saw traces of a probe droid's entry into a high window.

The door was secured, but Mace didn't hesitate. He cut a hole in it with his lightsaber and strode in. Obi-Wan and Bant followed.

The stone floors gleamed. Not an item seemed out of place. They walked through the empty rooms in the eerie silence. Then they mounted the stairs.

Upstairs, they finally saw evidence of a struggle. Furniture was overturned. Large crystal vases were smashed.

Mace looked up to the ceiling. He pointed to several smudge marks. "Probe droids."

The disturbance in the Force was now more than a ripple for Obi-Wan. It was a cresting wave. He moved forward, his hand on his lightsaber hilt. He turned a corner into Legislator Pleni's bedroom. It was untouched except for a halfway ajar door riddled with blaster fire.

Obi-Wan walked forward slowly, dreading what he would find behind that door. He nudged it open with the toe of his boot.

Legislator Pleni lay curled up in the corner, her hands clutching a blaster. A probe droid lay at her feet. She was dead.

Mace came up behind him noiselessly. Obi-Wan heard his deep sigh.

"We are always one step too late on New Apsolon," Mace said. Obi-Wan could locate in his voice the determination that this would no longer be the case.

They heard noises below, and the sound of feet on the stairs. Minutes later, a security squad burst in.

"She is in here," Mace said.

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He brought Obi-Wan and Bant downstairs, where the evidence of Legislator Pleni's horrible death was not in front of their eyes. They were questioned by the security squad, then told they were free to go. Still, Mace lingered.

When the security squad came downstairs at last, having completed its investigation, Mace stopped the head officer.

"Any conclusions?"

"Yes," the officer said, brushing past them.

Mace stood in front of him, effectively blocking his path. "You know that Manex has ordered the security squads to cooperate with the Jedi."

The officer hesitated. A gleam of malice lit up his eyes. "Fine. Let me tell you what we discovered then. Legislator Pleni was killed by a probe droid. We have been able to trace its owner."

"You have a name?" Mace Windu asked.

"Certainly." The security officer bared his teeth in a smile. "Your Jedi friend, Qui-Gon Jinn."

Chapter Ten

Qui-Gon got started early the next morning. He had spent most of the night going from café to café, trying to gather information. As the hours got later, tongues grew looser, but he did not discover anything that put him on Balog's track. Gossip swirled about Alani's bid for the Supreme Governor position and a growing swell of support for Manex. Neither helped him at all.

He spent the rest of the night on a bench in a grassy park, impatiently waiting for dawn. He could feel Balog out there, maneuvering, scheming, plotting his next move. He could feel the absence of Tahl as an ache so deep he could not face it directly. When he thought of her last days, what Balog had put her through, he would have to move, have to get up and walk through the park, driving himself to exhaustion so that he would not think of the dark vengeance that burned inside him. He would have to conquer it... somehow. He pushed his mind to numbness. It was the only way he could go on. Before long he had explored every path in the large urban park. He could draw a map of it blindfolded.

The suns rose, and people began to trickle out into the streets. Qui-Gon saw the morning begin with relief. He went to a café across from the Legislature for a light breakfast and watched and

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waited until the official buildings were full of people beginning their day.

Qui-Gon was still dressed in a traveler's cape over his tunic. He hoped he would not be recognizable as a Jedi. He decided to pose as a businessman looking for new opportunities on New Apsolon.

Just as he was about to leave, he overheard a conversation behind him. Two aides had just greeted each other. He heard the name "Legislator Pleni." And then he heard the name "Qui-Gon Jinn."

Qui-Gon bent over, pretending to sip his tea, while he filtered out the noise of the café and concentrated on the conversation behind him. He then received the unwelcome shock of discovering that he was wanted for the murder of a Legislator.

Which might make his intelligence-gathering plans in official buildings of the Legislature this morning more difficult than he had anticipated. Qui-Gon had great respect for the security officers on New Apsolon. He was certain that every one of them had a detailed physical description of him. And the Legislature's offices were guarded by security officers.

Qui-Gon's hands curled around his teacup. He had to place them in his lap. The urge to smash the cup into tiny pieces was too great. It seemed that every time he wanted to take a step forward, he was kicked a step back.

He let out air through his nose, breathing quietly and steadily. He was not thinking like a Jedi. Frustration must be controlled. There was always a way.

The streets were still crowded, but he needed to keep moving. He also needed a better disguise than a cloak. He could not hide his size, but he could transform himself in different ways. Qui-Gon left the café and went shopping.

Within a half hour, he had transformed himself into a dark-eyed businessman in a veda cloth robe. His long hair was concealed by a wrapped cloth headpiece favored by the elite of the planet of Rorgam. He had found it in a small shop selling

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used items. It would be good cover to pose as a citizen of Rorgam, a world made up of immigrants from many different worlds.

Qui-Gon headed for the halls of the Legislature. Because New Apsolon was a tech center for this corner of the galaxy, many deals were made here. With the growing instability of the planet, there was a certain frenzy in the air.

A security officer stood at the first checkpoint. Qui-Gon had no choice but to walk through. If he couldn't walk through the hallways without a challenge, he wouldn't be able to do anything.

He was relieved when he made it past the security officer, who merely gave him a bland look and moved his gaze to sweep the visitor behind him. He was lucky that Manex had not instituted higher security procedures that required text docs for admittance.

There were several things he needed to know. Why was he a suspect in Pleni's death? He had never heard of her until that morning. Was her death connected to Oleg's? Had she, too, tried to buy the list? Qui-Gon decided that the only course open to him was to present himself as a possible buyer as well. If the word got out that a prosperous businessman from Rorgam had money to spend, sooner or later someone would come forward with something to sell.

Drawing his robe around him, Qui-Gon plunged into the throng.

He was deep in conversation with an important Legislative aide when he saw Eritha and Alani heading down the hall. Alani was talking with a group of admirers who clustered closely around her. To his relief, they turned off down the hall. Eritha brought up the rear, and she spotted Qui-Gon. A look of surprise, then greeting, came over her face. Qui-Gon ignored her.

Eritha hesitated. Then her face smoothed out and became emotionless when she realized he did not want her to recognize him. All of this took only a beat of a moment. Once again Qui-

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Gon had cause to admire Eritha's cleverness. The girl had good reflexes.

Eritha signaled him discreetly and moved into a side hall. Qui-Gon wrapped up his conversation with the aide and casually strolled after her.

The hallway was empty, and she made sure he had followed before accessing a door. He followed her inside into a small conference room.

To his surprise, Eritha threw herself in his arms. "I'm so glad to see you," she said. "I was so worried." He patted her shoulder, and she stepped back. "You shouldn't be here. Do you know that you're wanted for murder?"

Qui-Gon nodded. "Do you know why? I've never met Legislator Pleni. Did Balog set this up?"

"I don't know," Eritha said. "Possibly. I know that Alani is still in touch with him. I'm here trying to get information. I think I have a lead. But I have to be careful. I don't want Alani to suspect, so I'm pretending to completely support her candidacy. And there's a rumor going around the Legislature that you should know about. Manex has the list of secret Absolute informers."

"Manex?"

Eritha nodded. "I have a feeling that Roan's brother is more ambitious than he pretends. He wants to hold on to his power."

"I'll need to be able to get in touch with you," Qui-Gon told her. "I'll be moving around frequently."

Eritha bit her lip. "Can you wait here for just a few minutes? I'm close to finding out where Balog is hiding. This conference room isn't used much anymore. I can be back within ten minutes."

"If you're delayed – "

"I won't be," Eritha said confidently, and hurried out the door.

Qui-Gon sighed. Eritha had all the impatience and optimism of youth. If she didn't return, he would have no way to get in

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touch with her. He would have to sneak into the Supreme Governor's residence.

There was nothing to do but wait. He could spare ten or fifteen minutes. Qui-Gon settled himself into a chair, going over what had happened that morning. He had dropped hints about how he was looking to buy power and would pay handsomely for it. He had even hinted at the existence of a list. Now and then he had caught a spark of interest in a Legislator or an aide, but he wasn't sure if it was based on knowledge or simply on pure greed.

Five minutes passed. Qui-Gon got up restlessly and went to the window. He looked down below at the crowded street beyond the Legislature wall. Was Balog moving about freely, or was he hiding during the daylight hours, letting his allies like Alani prepare the way for his return?

The door hissed open. But instead of Eritha, a confused-looking aide stood in the doorway. "I'm sorry – isn't this where the Rock Mining Development Act subcommittee is meeting?"

"I'm afraid not," Qui-Gon said.

"Oh. Sorry again." The young man nodded and withdrew, and the door hissed shut behind him.

An innocent interruption, Qui-Gon thought. But perhaps not. He thought carefully about the young man's appearance. He wore the navy tunic of an aide, but...

His boots. They were the boots that the security officers wore. He was doing a check of the rooms. And he could have recognized Qui-Gon.

Qui-Gon withdrew his lightsaber in one quick motion. He would have to contact Eritha later. He cut a neat hole in the glass and stepped through onto the ledge. Using his cable launcher, he lowered himself down to the pavement behind the wall.

"There he is!" Chips from the wall flew as blaster fire hit on either side of him. Qui-Gon looked up. Two security officers aimed their blasters at him.

"Don't move!" one of them shouted.

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Qui-Gon ran. He deflected the blaster fire as he zigzagged down the short passageway between the wall and the Legislative building. Then he leaped to the top of the wall and jumped over.

Pedestrians scattered as he landed. They looked at him curiously, but he matched his stride to theirs and continued walking. He increased his pace as they lost interest and turned down a side street. He weaved through the blocks surrounding the Legislature, finding a deserted alley to shed his overcloak and cap. No doubt a complete description of him was now updated on every security officer's data-pad. He would blend in better in his traveler's cloak.

Qui-Gon caught a repulsorlift airbus and stayed on it until the end of the line. He resolved to go back and find Eritha under cover of darkness.

Balog had always been one step ahead of him. This time, he resolved that he would be first.

Chapter Eleven

The holotape of Tahl as an Absolute had hurt the Jedi. Qui-Gon's arrest warrant made it worse. Mace ran into roadblocks whenever he tried to gather information. The support of Manex was no longer enough.

Obi-Wan saw the frustration tighten Mace's features. He knew that Mace was deeply concerned that Qui-Gon had not surfaced to clear his name. He, too, wondered what his Master was thinking. In rare moments of rest, he reached out with the Force, trying desperately to connect. At times he thought he could feel Qui-Gon, but it was not a strong, clear sensation. It was murky and gray. He knew his effort to reach his Master through the Force would not work. They would not connect. There was too much unresolved emotion swirling around Qui-Gon, too much he was trying to hide.

"You need rest," Mace said at the end of a long, fruitless day. "Both of you."

But neither Bant nor Obi-Wan wanted to retire to their quarters. They sat in Manex's private sitting room. Since Manex's favorite color was green and he believed in indulging himself, every cushion, every seating area, was a different shade of the color. The floors were of highly polished black stone. Obi-Wan felt almost dizzy sitting in the center of all that bright color, but

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Manex had insisted on giving the Jedi his favorite room, and they felt they could not refuse.

Manex returned from the Legislature only a few moments after the Jedi had. He rushed into the room, his curls waving, looking agitated.

"Qui-Gon was spotted at the Legislature. There was a blaster battle."

Obi-Wan felt a silent cry of protest rise inside him. He couldn't bear it if something happened to Qui-Gon now. His body went instantly cold. Bent moved closer to him, her shoulder touching his.

Mace stood. "What happened?"

"He escaped, of course."

Obi-Wan let out a long breath. Qui-Gon was safe. He felt Bent relax a fraction, and she gave Obi-Wan a look of pure relief.

Manex mopped his brow with a pale gold handkerchief. "What a day. I must tell you that there is a movement afoot to draft me for the elections. It is not a job that I seek. But I am thinking about it. Maybe it is time I got involved. I used to think my brother was the hero, the public servant. I used to say I was only here to make money." Manex shoved the handkerchief in his pocket. "Maybe I became the way I am because my brother was so noble. Now I am no longer sure what my role is. Maybe the time to abandon my principle of self-protection is here."

"What about Alani?" Obi-Wan asked. "Would it be hard for you to oppose her?" Manex did not know of Alani's tie to the Absolutes. He professed affection for the twins.

Manex hesitated. "I have to think of what is best for New Apsolon," he said. "And I've realized one thing. We cannot form a solid government – whether with me or another leader – if we do not expose Balog and the Absolutes. I have a plan."

Obi-Wan tried not to look dubious. He couldn't imagine what sort of plan Manex would devise.

"I will act as a decoy," he declared. "I'll let it be known that the list of secret informers has come into my possession."

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Mace shook his head. "No, it's too dangerous. You realize what happened to the last two beings who claimed this?"

"They are dead. Yes, I realize this very well." Manex clasped his hands together. "I'm trying not to think about it. And, actually, you can't say no, because I've already spread the rumor."

Obi-Wan saw how Bant watched the faces of the two men. She usually did not speak in meetings, but she was the most intent listener he'd ever seen. He could learn from her stillness, he suddenly thought.

"This may not be wise," Mace said, frowning.

"You're telling me," Manex snorted. "I'm hardly a courageous man. But I'm hoping that with Jedi protection, I'll be all right. If we can get Balog to expose himself, we can catch him. Don't you want to clear Qui-Gon's name?"

"Of course. But it is not clear if this is the way to do it," Mace said.

"It is the only way," Manex insisted. "You know it is."

Obi-Wan's gaze went from Manex to Mace. Of course he knew that Mace had to agree to protect Manex. It had been a foolish move on Manex's part, but no one wanted Obi-Wan's opinion. Now they would have to baby-sit Manex in the hope that Balog would show up. Was that what Manex wanted? Did he want to tie up the Jedi's time until he could consolidate power? Perhaps he was in league with Balog.

Obi-Wan reminded himself that Qui-Gon had trusted Manex. He had gently pointed out that just because a man enjoyed his wealth did not make him a man of bad character. Qui-Gon had seen something likeable in Manex's happy pursuit of his own pleasures.

"All right, we'll protect you," Mace said. "But we will form the plan."

The lights were still powered down in the house, as a house of mourning. Manex sat at a table in his garden, nervously fiddling

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with a cup of "the finest juice on New Apsolon – can I fetch the Jedi some glasses?" The Jedi had long ago refused, and Manex had hardly been able to eat or drink himself.

"Look relaxed," Mace told him in a low tone.

"I'm trying," Manex said between his teeth.

Mace stood behind a screen of bushes. Obi-Wan was a few yards away. Bant was on the opposite side of the small clearing where Manex had laid stone over the grass for an outdoor seating area.

If there was to be an ambush, Mace wanted plenty of room to maneuver. He had decided that Manex would eat his evening meal outside and then linger as the suns set. Manex had picked at his food and now was making a weak attempt to sip his juice in a serene fashion. He only succeeded in spilling it down his tunic.

The suns set, and the darkness grew. Only a small light on the table illuminated the area. Obi-Wan kept himself attuned for the sound of probe droids approaching. He was determined not to let Balog slip through their fingers. Once he was in their hands, they would have justice for Tahl. And Qui-Gon would return. Obi-Wan would never admit it to anyone, but he would feel better if they were the ones to catch Balog, not Qui-Gon.

Mace had linked the house's security system to his comlink. It must have vibrated an alert, for he turned to Obi-Wan. "Security has been breached on the east wall," he said.

"What?" Manex asked.

"Move closer to us as though you are looking at the stars," Mace ordered quietly.

Manex pushed his chair back. He rose, still clutching his cup, and pretended to look at the sky. Obi-Wan knew that Mace wanted Manex close to cover if anything happened. There was a low stone wall that they could push him behind in just a few seconds.

Obi-Wan felt a surge in the Force and saw a shadow flit across the lawn. It could have been a night bird or a shadow across the moon. But it wasn't.

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He and Mace sprang forward together. Bant came around the other side in a flanking motion. Obi-Wan pushed Manex behind the wall as he darted closer. Three lightsabers were activated as the Jedi advanced.

"Good to see you, too," Qui-Gon said, stepping into the light.

"Master!" Obi-Wan exclaimed.

He looked at Manex peeking over the wall at the three Jedi. "So I see it's a trap. Looks like I fell for it, not Balog."

"Qui-Gon," Mace began sternly, "what are you –"

He stopped abruptly. He and Qui-Gon looked toward the front of the dwelling. It took another beat or two, but Obi-Wan heard it, too. Angry pounding at the front door. A few seconds later Obi-Wan saw security forces pounding down the hall while Manex's protocol droid waved his arms in protest.

Mace hurried forward, saying over his shoulder to Qui-Gon, "I suggest you find another exit."

Drawing his robes around him, Mace quickly entered the house. They heard the angry voice of a security officer.

"I know he is here. We have our proof! He bought the probe droid that killed Legislator Pleni!"

Qui-Gon was screened by the elaborate bushes of the grounds. He hesitated, listening to the officer.

"Qui-Gon, you must go," Obi-Wan urged. "I'll come with you."

Qui-Gon hesitated. He met Obi-Wan's gaze. "No. I'm sorry I've caused you worry, Padawan," he said. "I must do this my way."

"But –" Obi-Wan began. Before he could finish, he felt his words snatched away by the wind, even before he had a chance to form them.

Qui-Gon had become a shadow again, moving across the soft green grass. Then he disappeared.

Chapter Twelve

Qui-Gon ran through the darkness, grateful for the new moons that made the night so dark. He moved from shadow to shadow noiselessly. When he had put a good deal of distance between himself and Manex's residence, he finally slowed down.

He was tired, but he wanted to run again. Pushing his body was the only time his mind had a chance to empty out. Facing Mace had been difficult. Facing Obi-Wan had been worse. He knew he belonged with the Jedi. Yet he could not seem to stop himself from going on alone. His emotions were too large right now, too raw. Around the Jedi he felt too exposed. Mace would see how difficult it was for him to maintain serenity. He could even order Qui-Gon back to the Temple. Qui-Gon could not allow that.

The truth was, he dreaded the moment he would walk back into the Temple and know that Tahl's footsteps would never echo in its halls again. The Temple would never again welcome him in the same way. Loss would be as much a part of it as shelter.

His fever to catch Balog battled with his fear of the future, when this mission would be over. He would be faced with only his grief to bear, and he would have to look ahead to empty years. What would happen to him then?

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A deep chill caused him to shudder. The cool wind was drying his sweat. He saw a security patrol ahead and quickly turned down a side street. Once again he would not sleep tonight. He would have to keep alert. Every officer in the city was now looking for Qui-Gon Jinn.

But he had learned something. They had tied him to the murder through the probe droids. He could not understand why the probe droids had attacked someone instead of tracking Balog, as they had been programmed to do. He wondered if the two droids that had veered off when attacking him had actually been his own droids. It had been strange that they had suddenly gone away. Did that mean that his droids had attacked Oleg, too? Someone had reprogrammed them.

He needed answers, and for once he knew where to find them. He would pay a visit to the black-market dealer, Mota, who had sold him the droids. If they were reprogrammed, Mota was undoubtedly the link to whoever reprogrammed them. And if that person was Balog, he might have a way to contact him.

Qui-Gon circled back and glanced down the street. The security officer was gone. He struck out across the road into the park. There were more places to hide here in case he was spotted. And cutting across the park would bring him closer to the Worker Sector.

Qui-Gon suddenly sensed that someone was behind him, matching his footsteps and trying to match his speed. Qui-Gon melted off into the trees. He made an arc and came up behind his pursuer. He saw a glint of gold hair in the darkness. It was Eritha.

He strode forward and grasped her arm. She gasped, then saw it was him. She was breathing hard, as if she'd just had a hard run. "I've been following you since you left Manex," she said. "Or at least I've been trying to. I lost you and kept circling around. Finally I thought I saw you enter the park."

"Why are you following me?"

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She leaned over, trying to catch her breath. Her braids were unraveling, and her face was flushed.

"Does Manex have the list?"

"No. Was that why you are following me?"

Eritha shook her head. "It's because I couldn't wait until you contacted me. I guessed you would go to Manex tonight. I've got the information you need. I overheard Alani. I know where Balog is. I can take you there."

Chapter Thirteen

The Jedi still kept watch over Manex, who had now retired to his reception room for a rest. Mace covered the front of the residence while Bant stayed outside in the rear. Obi-Wan was positioned behind the curving stairway. From here he had a vantage point to the door of the reception room. He had a feeling it would be a long night.

Use your time. You'll find one day that you have too little of it.

Qui-Gon's words rose in his mind. Obi-Wan was still going over and over what he should have done when he saw his Master. The cloudy aura he felt around Qui-Gon had worried him deeply. He sensed confusion and static, and it prevented him from truly connecting. It had shaken him. Maybe it had prevented him from acting more quickly. Should he have followed

Qui-Gon, gone with him no matter what he said?

Use your time...

Obi-Wan didn't think he could. His thoughts were too confused.

That is the time you need discipline most. That is what your training is for.

All right, then. He would stop the voice of Qui-Gon in his head by obeying him.

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Although he was tired, although he felt that he had gone over the events of the past days too many times to count, Obi-Wan focused his mind and started again. He went over every event since he and Qui-Gon had stepped foot on New Apsolon. He turned things over in his thoughts, searching for inconsistencies. He considered every unanswered question and every possible answer.

Irini had sworn that she wasn't the one who had fired on them on their first day. They had never discovered who it had been for sure. Balog? They hadn't yet been a threat to him, had they?

Was it just a coincidence that security showed up at Mota's while they were buying the probe droids? It seemed likely now that Alani had told them about Mote in order to trap them. She could have been the one to alert security that the Jedi were buying illegal goods.

The droids must have been reprogrammed to attack Pleni.

Obi-Wan pushed these questions aside. He did not think they would bring him closer to Balog. If only the answers were clear. If only they could get a solid lead. If only Eritha had come through with information on Balog. She had been at her sister's side for more than two days now. Surely she must have learned something.

Would it prove too difficult for Eritha to betray her sister?

But she had already taken a step she could not retake, Obi-Wan knew. On finding out that her sister was behind Tahl's kidnapping, she had gone in search of Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon. She had risked much to do so. She could easily have lost her life in the cave. Obi-Wan remembered how afraid Eritha had been as the explosives were going off and the cave was collapsing. He admired how she'd been able to go on so bravely despite her fear. He still remembered her scream. *They forgot me! They left without me!*

Obi-Wan concentrated for a moment. There was something about the way Eritha had sounded that bothered him now. What

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was it? The emotion that was driving her was slightly off from what he would expect.

Astonished. She'd been astonished. And betrayed.

They forgot me!

As if they shouldn't have, as if she were somehow privileged, even though she was a prisoner.

If she had been a prisoner...

And why had she been heading toward the *back* of the cave?

Yes, the smoke had been thick near the front of the cave. But wouldn't she have tried to push through?

She was heading for the other exit near the back of the cave, Obi-Wan realized. But how had she known about it? They had not found it when Eritha had been captured. She should have had no way of knowing how deep the cave was.

Slow down, Obi-Wan warned himself. There could be other explanations for what had happened. Eritha had been panicked. She was reacting, not thinking.

But since the suspicion had been lodged in his mind, Obi-Wan went back to Eritha's behavior while they were together. He concentrated, bringing the memory back moment by moment, as fresh as if it had happened that morning.

Eritha had seemed sincere when she caught up with them. Shortly after, they'd been attacked by the Rock Workers. Eritha had been genuinely surprised by the attack, Obi-Wan was sure, and genuinely afraid. When Qui-Gon had warned her to stay behind them, she had readily agreed.

So why then did she suddenly dodge forward when their probe droid was in sight? She had forced them to protect her. As a result, Obi-Wan had received a leg injury and their probe droid had been destroyed. Could it have been a desperate attempt to destroy their only method of tracking Balog?

And what about the attack on the Rock Worker settlement? Qui-Gon had told him that he had met up with Eritha before dawn. She had been planning to refuel the speeders. Or so she had said. But what if she'd actually been planning to leave? If she

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and Alani were plotting against the Jedi, they had done their work. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan were without a probe droid. They had no way to track Balog. Eritha had not known that Obi-Wan was better and was able to travel. She would have most likely assumed that Qui-Gon would stay in the settlement.

Maybe she was leaving because she knew of the attack.

Could it be possible? Obi-Wan wondered.

Could Eritha have misled them into thinking that she was the good sister? Were both sisters out for the power they could grab?

There was one last thing. When Obi-Wan and Eritha had arrived back in New Apsolon, Eritha had been furious that Manex had stepped in and offered his own med team for Tahl. Obi-Wan had seen it in her eyes. He had thought it was because she held the same distrust for Manex as he did and was concerned about Tahl's recovery. But what if the opposite were true? What if she *didn't* want Tahl to recover?

What if he had suspected the wrong person? What if Manex was good, and Eritha was bad? Never had he longed for Qui-Gon more.

When Manex had told them of his decision to run for office, Obi-Wan had brought up Alani. Why had Manex hesitated? Was there a reason he was running against Ewane's daughter?

Obi-Wan rubbed his eyes. The lack of sleep and rest was getting to him. His thoughts whirled. He didn't know if he was constructing a case against Eritha on no evidence, or whether this was worth pursuing. Why would the twins call for Tahl's help in the first place, if they planned a power grab all along? It didn't make sense.

Obi-Wan knew his mind would not rest until he had found out some answers. He went to the door of Manex's reception room and pressed the indicator light that would alert Manex that he had a visitor.

The door hissed open a few seconds later. "Is it Balog?" Manex whispered from the darkness.

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"No. I need to ask you some questions," Obi-Wan said, stepping inside.

Manex powered up a low light by his sleep couch. He swung his legs over and rubbed his eyes. "I am at your service."

"Why did you insist on your own med team for Tahl?" Obi-Wan asked bluntly. "Surely the team for the Supreme Governor is just as good."

"But mine is better," Manex said. "Don't you remember that I have the best of everything?" He tried to say this jokingly, but it sounded hollow.

"Is there some reason you don't trust Alani and Eritha?" Obi-Wan asked. "If so, you must tell the truth. If you have a suspicion, you must name it."

Manex looked away for a moment, thinking. "I have no real proof," he said slowly. "I did not think it fair to speak until I had some evidence. Those girls have been through so much. First the death of their father, then their protector. At first I thought I was crazy to suspect them."

"Suspect them of what?" Obi-Wan demanded.

"Of working with the Absolutes," Manex told him. "A terrible accusation for the daughters of a Worker hero. But that is why I am running for Supreme Governor against Alani. I can't watch the government fall into the hands of the corrupt again."

"What makes you suspect them? And are you sure it is both of them?"

"Alani does not make a move without Eritha," Manex said. "And Eritha does not make a move without Alani. As I said, I have no proof. Just a couple of overheard words. Unguarded moments. The way they communicate to each other. I sensed a falseness in their grieving for Roan. And today, when I heard that Qui-Gon had been in the United Legislature, I also found out one thing – he had been with Eritha just before the security squad was sent after him."

"Do you think she turned him in?"

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"I don't know," Manex said. He spread his hands. "I'm sorry. It isn't much to go on. You see why I didn't want to say anything. I know nothing for sure. It is all instinct."

"I believe in instinct," Obi-Wan said, and headed for the door.

He took the back exit of the dwelling. He didn't want to run into Mace. Bant came forward out of the shadows as he hurried across the lawn.

"Obi-Wan, where are you going?"

"Tell Mace I need to talk to Eritha," Obi-Wan said.

"But can't it wait?" Bant asked, frowning.

"No. Nothing can wait. I'll explain later. Tell Mace that I'm gone." Obi-Wan did not think that Balog would attack tonight, but he knew Mace and Bant could handle it if it happened. He was more worried about Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon still trusted Eritha.

The Supreme Governor's residence was close by. Obi-Wan circled around the building to the back. If he remembered the layout correctly, Eritha's room was at the back. She had no reason to think that Obi-Wan suspected her. She would join him outside, and then he could question her. If he had the slightest feeling that his doubts about her were correct, he would demand that Mace let him find Qui-Gon.

When he reached the back area, he saw that someone was walking along the dark lawn. At first he didn't know which twin it was. But as she came forward, he knew for certain it was Alani. The two girls were almost identical. Perhaps they could fool others. They were not able to fool him.

"Good evening, Alani," he said.

"I see you couldn't sleep, either," Alani said. "Tomorrow is a big day. My name is being presented to the people for the vote. I'll fulfill my father's legacy."

Obi-Wan decided on the spot to be bold. He would not get anywhere playing games with Alani. "Your father's legacy?" he asked. "But Ewane was never in league with the Absolutes. They just imprisoned and tortured him. You have changed his legacy, I think."

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Alani looked deeply shocked for just a moment. Then she forced out a laugh. "You're joking."

"No. I'm making a point." Obi-Wan took another step toward her. "I believe you are nothing like your father."

Alani took an involuntary step back. Then she gathered her courage and raised her chin. "It doesn't matter what you think. Eritha told me that we have nothing to fear from the Jedi any longer. Your friend is chasing air. Soon you'll be too busy trying to get him out of jail. And I will rule New Apsolon."

"Are you so sure of yourself?" Obi-Wan asked. "Are you so sure you won't be exposed?"

"Exposure is no longer possible," Alani said. "The Jedi have no proof. The people of New Apsolon love me. Eritha was right."

"So Eritha is your ally."

"She is my sister and my protector. She is part of me," Alani said. "She told me that she was smarter than the Jedi, and she was right. She told me not to worry. I can rule New Apsolon with her by my side. Eritha doesn't like the limelight, but she wants the power. I like it when people are around me and want to talk to me. So I will rule, and she will tell me what to do the way she always has. She told me she would take care of Qui-Gon, and she is doing just that. It was so simple a child could do it. And we are not children anymore. We never had a childhood. Our mother died. Our father was imprisoned. Then he became ruler, and we never saw him. So we can take the only thing he left us, his good name, and make something of ourselves. That's what Eritha says."

He had to keep her talking. Alani, he saw, was not as clever as Eritha.

"What about Tahl?" he asked, ignoring the surge of anger that rocked him when he mentioned her name. The anger would flow through him and pass. "She was kind to you and you betrayed her."

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"She was useful," Alani said, coloring for a moment. "I didn't think she would die. But Eritha says that she will be useful again. Because of Tahl, Qui-Gon will trust Eritha without thinking. He will go with her wherever she wants, even to World Security headquarters itself. That is how smart my sister is. She planted a tracking device on Qui-Gon today at the Legislature. We've known where he is at all times. She will lead him right to security headquarters, and he will follow her! If he escapes, it doesn't matter. They'll find him anyway. Isn't that a clever plan?"

It was all he needed. Without another word, Obi-Wan whirled and ran.

"You're too late, Obi-Wan!" Alani shouted after him. "Just like you were too late for Tahl!"

Chapter Fourteen

Obi-Wan raced down the wide boulevard, heading for the government buildings. He fervently hoped he wasn't too late.

The World Security headquarters loomed ahead, a squat gray building. He saw two figures hurrying toward it. On one side of the building was a large pen that held hovercraft and swoops. On the other side was the high stone wall that separated the parkland from the road.

"Qui-Gon!" he shouted.

Qui-Gon turned and saw him. Eritha touched his arm, obviously urging him to ignore Obi-Wan and enter the building. Obi-Wan put on a burst of speed and reached out to the Force. He leaped.

At the top of his leap, the doors to the security headquarters flew open. Officers and attack droids spilled down the stairs.

The Force must have warned Qui-Gon, for his lightsaber was activated and in his hand before Obi-Wan hit the ground near him. With one hand, Qui-Gon pushed Eritha out of the danger and leaped forward to cover her.

By now Obi-Wan was close enough to speak to Qui-Gon. "They won't harm her. She betrayed you," he said, taking up his position next to Qui-Gon.

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Qui-Gon didn't react. He kept his eyes on the officers and droids, which were wheeling in formation in front.

"We must take out the droids," Qui-Gon told him. "Don't harm an officer. I'm wanted. They're only doing their job. As soon as the last attack droid goes down, we leave. What do you say we take the offensive?"

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan leaped together in one motion. The droids began to pepper them with blaster fire. The security officers stayed behind duraplast shields, waiting for the droids to do their work.

The Jedi's lightsabers moved in tandem, blocking blaster fire and sending it zinging back in the droids' direction. The security officers ducked behind their shields at the surprising return of fire.

The droids fanned out in a flanking maneuver. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon split up. Obi-Wan took the left, Qui-Gon the right. One by one, they smashed their way through the line.

Initially, the officers kept behind their shields. But as the battle waned and the blaster fire petered out, they grew more bold. Some drew their blasters and fired.

"Now, Padawan!" Qui-Gon shouted, deflecting fire.

The two Jedi leaped over a line of security vehicles. Blaster fire ripped into the vehicles a split second later. With another great leap, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon landed on the other side of the park wall. Obi-Wan had just enough time to see Eritha's twisted look of rage as they reached safety. That told him everything he needed to know.

They took off through the darkness of the park. Obi-Wan heard the distant sound of a revving hoverscout.

"Master, Eritha planted a tracking device on you somehow," Obi-Wan said. "At the Legislature today."

"When she embraced me," Qui-Gon said. As he ran, he carefully felt his clothing and skin. He found the whisper-light device on the back of his utility belt. He threw it away into the darkness, then veered off in the opposite direction.

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The bright lights of the hoverscout swept the park, but it turned toward the tracking device. Now they could hear security officers crashing through the trees. The attackers would follow the device for a time.

The Jedi kept under the cover of giant trees with leaves that offered a degree of protection. The trees were planted so close together that even swoops would have a hard time maneuvering through them.

Qui-Gon led them along a zigzagging path through the park, ducking when he saw lights overhead and then moving on. He seemed to know the park well, Obi-Wan noted. Soon they were close to the other end of the park. They leaped over the wall and hurried down the dark streets. After a few blocks Obi-Wan recognized where he was. Qui-Gon had brought them to the Worker Sector.

They paused to catch their breath in the shadow of an alley between two tall buildings.

"Thank you, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "I did not think I needed help. Obviously, I did. How did you know that Eritha would betray me?"

"Instinct," Obi-Wan said. "Alani confirmed it. They are not afraid of anything, let alone the Jedi. Alani said that they no longer feared exposure."

"That must mean they are in possession of the list," Qui-Gon mused. "So we can stop chasing it."

"Alani gave the impression that Balog is not the killer of Oleg and Pleni," Obi-Wan said. "She said you were chasing air."

"But I saw him right before Oleg was killed," Qui-Gon said.

"Maybe he wasn't after Oleg. Maybe he was after you," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"That is possible," Qui-Gon said slowly.

"Where to next?" Obi-Wan asked. He hoped his Master would allow him to stay by his side. He had already decided that if Qui-Gon told him he must return to Mace, he would not go.

"Mota," Qui-Gon said. "He holds the key."

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Qui-Gon activated the laser pointer to indicate to Mota that he had visitors outside. It seemed a long time before the door slid open. Mota stood in the doorway.

"I'm closed," he said. "Even I need my rest. Come back tomorrow."

Holding out a hand, Qui-Gon used the Force to keep the door open. Mota stared at the door, then at Qui-Gon. He shrugged.

"On the other hand, why should I turn down business?" he asked. He turned and disappeared into the warehouse.

The Jedi followed him. They knew the way down the ramp to the lower levels where Mota kept his stash of black-market items.

Mota was waiting. Instead of the Worker unsuit he had worn to do business, he was now dressed in a sleep tunic, his white legs thrust into a threadbare pair of slippers.

"What is it this time, Jedi? Another probe droid? Did you lose another one? You have the worst luck of anyone I've ever met."

"We want information," Qui-Gon said.

Mota eyed him. "Information has a price, too."

Obi-Wan saw his Master's frustration boil over. He had never seen Qui-Gon this angry before.

"The price will be that I do not break apart every item in this warehouse," Qui-Gon said, taking a step toward Mota.

The man suddenly looked frail in his nightshirt next to Qui-Gon's size and strength. "N-now, relax, we're all friends here," he stuttered.

"I'm not your friend, and I'm not here to relax!" Qui-Gon thundered. "I'm here to find out why my droids were reprogrammed. And you have the answer."

Mota backed up until a table was between him and Qui-Gon.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he said.

Obi-Wan spoke quickly, wanting to give Qui-Gon a moment to control his anger. *If* he could control it. Obi-Wan's worry increased. This was a Qui-Gon he had never seen. Qui-Gon's

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sense of urgency had always been controlled. If anger came, it came in flashes of lightning that left serenity behind.

"We know that the probe droids were reprogrammed, Mota," Obi-Wan said in a calmer tone. "They never went after Balog at all. Instead they attacked two other beings. The question is, did you do it?"

Mota swallowed. "It wasn't me," he said quickly. "I don't know who it was. Someone broke into my files. I have a warning system built in, so I knew the next time I accessed them."

"When?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Within hours after you left," Mota said. "I don't know how. Or who. You can't trust anyone these days."

"How did the security forces know that Qui-Gon had bought those droids?" Obi-Wan asked.

"They asked me," Mota said in a small voice. "All my droids are coded. They tracked the droids here. I told them the Jedi Qui-Gon had bought them. I had to tell the truth. You wouldn't want me to land in jail, would you?" Mota tried to smile.

Qui-Gon gave him an even stare. Mota backed up even farther. "Ah, I guess I should have mentioned to the officers that I suspected the droids were reprogrammed. But when speaking to security officers, it's better not to answer questions they don't ask. They might have gone through all my files. I wouldn't be able to protect my clients. And I would be out of business. Nobody wants that. You might need another probe droid, for example – "

"We need access to your computers," Obi-Wan said brusquely. "Right now."

"Of course, help yourself." Mota hurriedly pointed to his datascreen. "Just don't erase any profits, heh heh."

Qui-Gon immediately began clicking keys and accessing datafiles. "Did you try to trace the break-in?"

"No," Mota admitted. "I'm not that advanced. I just know how to track inventory and money."

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Qui-Gon continued to move through Mota's files with astonishing speed. Obi-Wan knew he was missing nothing. He could see the level of concentration on his Master's face.

Qui-Gon hit a few keys, activating a search mode Obi-Wan didn't recognize. Within seconds, he got a reply.

"Do you recognize this code?" he asked, pointing to the datascreen.

Mota leaned closer. "It's the Worker data address," he said. "It's already in my files." "Who uses it?" Qui-Gon asked.

Mota's face was tinged blue from the data-screen. "Irini and Lenz," he said.

Chapter Fifteen

Obi-Wan dashed after Qui-Gon. His Master had moved so quickly he had not had time to gather his thoughts or decide on a direction. He had expected him to head for the ramp to the street, but instead Qui-Gon ran to the lower level. He needed fast transport.

"Open those bay doors!" Qui-Gon yelled to Mota as he ran.

Unease thudded with every heartbeat as Obi-Wan chased after Qui-Gon. He had never seen his Master like this. Qui-Gon seemed to barely register his surroundings or Obi-Wan's presence. All his will was directed at his goal.

It was the goal that worried Obi-Wan. Was it justice... or revenge?

By the time they reached the lower level, the door at the end of the long warehouse space stood open. Qui-Gon jumped into an airspeeder. Obi-Wan barely had time to scramble into the passenger seat when Qui-Gon throttled the engines and zoomed down the tunnel.

The engines were pushed almost to full, much too fast to maneuver in the tunnel. Obi-Wan could see that the bay doors at the end of the tunnel had not had a chance to open. Still Qui-Gon did not reduce his speed.

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Obi-Wan whipped his head around to face him. Qui-Gon wasn't just pressing his luck. This was pure recklessness. "Master!"

Qui-Gon's face seemed carved from the gray stone of New Apsolon. His lips were a thin line. His hands stayed steady on the controls. He seemed not to hear Obi-Wan.

A crack of gray light appeared ahead. It widened. The doors were opening, but too slowly for Obi-Wan's comfort.

"Hang on!" Qui-Gon warned.

Obi-Wan just had time to clutch for support as Qui-Gon flipped the airspeeder sideways. Without slackening speed, he zoomed through the opening, clearing it by centimeters. They flew into the dark night.

Obi-Wan pressed himself back into the seat, trying to still his ragged breathing. Qui-Gon seemed poised on the brink of losing control. There didn't seem anything Obi-Wan could do or say to stop him or get him to slow down. Obi-Wan tried to stifle his own panic. He had to trust his Master.

But for the first time in their long partnership, he didn't think he could. That knowledge made fear grasp him by the throat.

Qui-Gon piloted the craft expertly through the deserted streets. He pulled up in front of Lenz's hideout and flew up the stairs. He pounded on Lenz's door. They heard the creak of a floorboard.

"Don't try your escape route," Qui-Gon warned. "We'll find you."

The door opened. Lenz looked at them warily. He looked more frail than usual, his skin pale and shiny. "It's the middle of the night."

Qui-Gon slammed the door open wider and strode inside. "I need to speak with you and Irini. If she's not here, contact her."

"She is here. But you can't see her," Lenz said quietly. "She's ill –"

Qui-Gon ignored him and pulled open a closed door. He stopped short. Obi-Wan came up behind him. Irini lay on a sleep

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couch, covered in a blanket. She was shivering, and her face shone with sweat. "What is it? What's wrong?" Obi-Wan asked. Lenz pushed past him to kneel by Irini's side.

"A blaster attack. She won't see a medic." Obi-Wan hurried forward. "She needs bacta." "I know," Lenz said.

"Who did this?" Qui-Gon demanded. "Balog," Irini said through clenched teeth. "He has the list now."

"So you had the list all along?" Qui-Gon asked her.

"No. I stole it from Legislator Pleni."

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon. Did that mean that Irini had reprogrammed the droids to attack the Legislator? Was she a murderer?

She saw the look that passed between them. "I... had to get... that list," she said, in obvious pain. "I didn't want anyone to die. But I couldn't let anyone stand in my way, either."

"And you wanted me to get blamed for it?" Qui-Gon asked.

She shook her head. "I was surprised at that. But I could hardly come forward to clear you."

Qui-Gon bent down and swiftly examined Irini's wounds. His anger seemed to have drained away at the sight of her distress. She needed help. "Your wounds won't kill you if you see a medic. But I see signs of infection already."

"That's what I told her," Lenz said. He brushed back damp hair from Irini's forehead. "She still refuses."

"Did you send your probe droids after Oleg, too?" Obi-Wan asked.

Irini nodded. "I was tracking him. I told Qui-Gon I wanted to protect Oleg, but it was a lie. He betrayed us. We needed the list. If he had only given it up... if Pleni had only given it up... none of this would have happened."

"Why?" Obi-Wan asked. "You said you had renounced violence."

Irini pressed her lips together and did not answer.

"She did it for me," Lenz said.

"Lenz – " Irini began warningly.

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"It has gone too far, Irini." Lenz's voice was tender. "You have protected me too long. Do you think I will watch you die for me, too?" He turned to the Jedi. "My name is on the list."

"You were an informer?" Qui-Gon asked.

"He was tortured," Irini said. She let out a small gasp and closed her eyes in pain. "What they did to him... no one should have to endure."

"That is not an excuse," Lenz said firmly. "I confessed to Irini, and she forgave me. Others would not. I gave the Absolutes information – "

Irini struggled to sit up, but the pain made her lie flat again. "Don't tell them, Lenz," she begged. "It is our secret. It can remain our secret. Your career is too important. You are a great leader – "

"No," Lenz said sadly. "I am no longer, if I ever was. The Workers will go on without me." He turned to the Jedi. "This was five years ago. The Absolutes raided a meeting place. Two Workers were killed, the rest imprisoned. They let me go." He looked at Irini sadly. "Now we both have two deaths on our conscience, Irini."

He stood. "I am going to call a med team." Irini protested, but Lenz went on firmly. "Balog has the list now. He has won. He will remove his own name from the list, and all the secrets will be revealed. He will discredit his enemies, including me." Lenz looked tenderly at Irini. "As for my Irini, I would rather have her alive and imprisoned than dead."

Irini turned her face to the wall. Obi-Wan saw her shoulders shake with sobs.

Lenz turned to the Jedi. "I did not know what Irini had done, and I'm sorry to hear that you were blamed for her crimes. We owe you our help now more than ever. You know that Alani is running for Supreme Governor. Recently we have realized that though she wants Worker support, she does not need it. Someone else is supporting her – with finances that we do not have. This has made us suspicious. I have received news tonight

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from our spy in the Supreme Governor's residence. He's discovered that there is a secret tunnel between the residence and the Absolute Museum. In the old days it was used when those captured were secretly transported to Absolute headquarters. The museum is closed now. It is just a guess, but wouldn't it be the perfect place for Balog and the Absolutes to hide? The twins could smuggle him in and out easily until Alani is elected tomorrow."

It made sense, Obi-Wan realized. It would be like Balog to hide in the one place so obvious that they would never think to look there, the site of the recording of the great wrongs the Absolutes had visited on New Apsolon.

By the look on his Master's face, Obi-Wan could tell that Qui-Gon had reached the same conclusion.

"We must go tonight," Qui-Gon said. "Tomorrow will be too late."

Chapter Sixteen

They sped through the dark, empty streets back to the Civilized Sector. Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon felt that Balog was in their grasp. And right now Qui-Gon was giving every sign of a man bent on revenge.

He was almost afraid to say anything. The look on Qui-Gon's face was so forbidding. The years of experience with his Master, the closeness they'd shared, it all seemed to evaporate in the night air. Qui-Gon was like a stranger.

He had thought that if only he could be with his Master, he would be able to help him control his ravaged feelings of grief and anger. He had spent the past days in torment, thinking that he needed to be by Qui-Gon's side. Now he saw that his presence had no meaning for Qui-Gon. His Master was lost in his own quest. If he was bent on revenge, Obi-Wan might not be able to interfere. Qui-Gon's will combined with his great skills might make him impossible to stop. Obi-Wan felt chilled at the thought. He would have to try.

Tonight he could lose his Master to the dark path. The impossible had become possible. He could feel it in the dark energy within the Force, swirling and crashing around Qui-Gon. Never had he felt so helpless.

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Obi-Wan gathered his own connection to the Force. He resolved that no matter what, he would remain by his Master's side. He could not lose hope. He would protect his Master from himself if he had to. He would not lose Qui-Gon on this dark night.

Qui-Gon pulled up in front of the Supreme Governor's residence.

"Master, we should contact Mace Windu," Obi-Wan said.

Qui-Gon leaped out of the speeder. "Whatever you want."

Obi-Wan activated his comlink as he jumped out of the speeder and ran after Qui-Gon. He spoke hastily into the comlink to Mace about what they had learned.

"Wait for us," Mace said. "We're close."

"It's too late," Obi-Wan said, as Qui-Gon began cutting a hole in the front door of the residence with his lightsaber.

He shut off the comlink and followed Qui-Gon through the hole. The security devices sounded an alarm, and a security officer emerged from the booth. He eyed the Jedi but did not draw his blaster.

"Lenz called ahead," he said. "I'll shut these down. I already disabled the link to World Security."

Qui-Gon nodded. Obi-Wan was glad for this bit of luck. The Workers' spy was on duty. Of course the twins had heard the commotion, but at least security reinforcements wouldn't be called. They would only have to deal with the security in the residence itself, at least for a time.

Lenz had given them details on how to reach the tunnel. Qui-Gon ran toward the back of the house, Obi-Wan matching his stride. They knew the entrance was in a storage area for the Kitchens.

They burst into the storage area. Eritha stood casually in the middle of the floor, holding two blasters aimed at their chests.

"You have to kill me to get through that door," she said. She looked older than her years. Her face was pale, and her eyes glittered. Her gold hair straggled down her back.

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"I am prepared to do that," Qui-Gon said. Obi-Wan did not glance at his Master. He hoped Qui-Gon was bluffing. He did not know how close to the edge Qui-Gon was. He couldn't sense his Master any longer. There was only grayness and static between them.

"You think I will not attack because you are a young girl," Qui-Gon said. "But the moment you set out on your path to power, you took on the consequences of an adult. You are responsible for Tahl's death."

"I am not responsible!" Eritha said shrilly. "Others have survived the sensory deprivation device. Why couldn't she? She was a Jedi!"

"She was locked in it for days," Qui-Gon said. "Far longer than any Absolute prisoner."

He spoke in a flat, unemotional tone. Somehow he had pushed grief down so far that it did not tinge his words. That worried Obi-Wan more than his earlier display of anger. Did this mean that Qui-Gon had now accepted his revenge and was willing and ready to act on it?

"I didn't have anything against Tahl," Eritha said. "She is a casualty of war. We brought her here because we knew she would come. Everything was all planned. We needed a Jedi presence at first to cover for us. With Jedi support the rest would be easy. Balog would kidnap us and Roan would resign. Alani would run for his post. Then we found out about the list. Balog was on it. We knew Roan had it, and we knew he was waiting to expose Balog. He thought Balog had been his friend. He didn't want to expose him, but he would. Everyone would know that Balog had been an Absolute. It would have spoiled our plans! We had to get that list. You'd think as head of World Security that Balog would be helpful. He was useless. He leaked the information to the Absolutes, and someone stole the list. Only he didn't bring it to Balog. He kept it so he could sell it. We didn't know who it was."

Jude Watson

"Oleg," Obi-Wan said. He wanted to keep Eritha talking. He was uneasy about how Qui-Gon's urgency had changed to a deadly calm. He could feel through the Force that there was no serenity in this calm. Qui-Gon was staring at Eritha as though she were an obstacle, not a person.

"Yes. Just our luck-the Absolute who gets his hands on the list turns out to be a Worker spy," Eritha said. "But all we knew then was that someone had it. We needed help – more help than Balog could give us. We needed someone with brains and courage. It was lucky that Tahl was coming. I knew we could get her to help us without knowing it. She was generous that way. She would do what we asked. She still thought of us as helpless young girls with no mother or real father."

Qui-Gon closed his eyes.

"We let her think it was her idea to infiltrate the Absolutes. We knew she'd find out about the list and try to get it for us."

"She trusted you," Obi-Wan said.

Eritha shrugged. "Everyone trusts us. That's our advantage. We are the daughters of the great hero Ewane. The great hero who barely spent one day in his daughters' presence but passed them off to strangers to raise. The great hero who only thought about his planet, not his own flesh and blood." Eritha's lip curled. "Why shouldn't we use that trust? Tahl did everything we asked and more. When she was seen escaping with Oleg, we thought she had the list. But she didn't bring it to us, so we had to take it. Everything was completely logical. If Tahl had only told us the truth – that she didn't have the list – she wouldn't be dead."

"Balog would have killed her anyway," Obi-Wan said.

"You don't know that," Eritha said craftily. "He might have let her go."

"You're lying," Qui-Gon said flatly.

"Maybe." Obi-Wan was shocked at the cruelty in Eritha's eyes, like a large creature playing with a tiny one before gobbling it up.

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"You'll never know. Maybe it's your fault that Tahl is dead, Qui-Gon."

Obi-Wan saw the color drain from Qui-Gon's face. He saw his hand move toward his lightsaber. Obi-Wan could wait no longer. He threw himself forward at Eritha, who had locked eyes with Qui-Gon, taunting him.

His leg shot out, knocking one blaster from her hand. She screamed but he was already twisting behind her, grabbing her other wrist and wrenching the blaster from it. He tucked both in his belt.

"You hurt me!" she cried, grabbing her wrist.

"Qui-Gon, hurry," Obi-Wan urged. His Master hadn't moved. But at his words he rushed forward toward the tunnel entrance.

"You killed her, Qui-Gon!" Eritha screamed after them as they accessed the tunnel door. "Live with that, if you live at all!"

Chapter Seventeen

Qui-Gon had no doubt that within minutes Eritha would send security attack droids after them. He knew that ahead of them, the Absolutes would be well armed. He gave no more thought to the obstacles than to a pesky insect. He did not strategize. He would charge ahead, and he would win. That was all he knew.

Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan give a quick glance at him. He told himself not to display the temper he had showed at Mota's. His Padawan was worried about how quick to anger he was. Qui-Gon himself had been surprised at how his anger had continued to rise. He knew he was feeding it instead of letting it go. It gave him speed and focus.

He knew his attitude was bringing him dangerously close to the dark side. He knew with a chance for silence and stillness he would be able to see this. But he didn't have the luxury.

He would have to count on his own ability to control his anger at the proper time.

The tunnel ran below the governor's residence. It had been unused for many years, and was dark and stuffy. Qui-Gon ran by the light of his saber. He knew Obi-Wan was behind him. His Padawan would give him support, but he knew he did not need it. This was between him and Balog.

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Eritha's words had stunned him, but he had filed them away for the long sleepless nights ahead of him. Balog was his object.

The tunnel ended in a durasteel door. Qui-Gon cut through it and stepped inside. He was in the lower level of the museum.

"Droids behind us, Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan spoke quietly in his ear. "Coming from the residence."

A nuisance. They would have to be dealt with before they could proceed.

Qui-Gon turned as the first droids tumbled through the opening, already engaging them in blaster fire. They were lucky. The droids were programmed to advance, but they were not programmed to strategize. They simply took the easiest route to their prey and poured through the opening in the door, where Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan were waiting.

Obi-Wan deflected fire while slicing at the droids. Impatiently, Qui-Gon swung his light-saber like a club. He had no time for finesse. He needed to cut down as many droids as possible in the shortest amount of time.

Obi-Wan was a blur by his side. Qui-Gon was grateful for his Padawan's speed. Soon the floor was littered with smoking droids.

There were only two more left. "Take them down," Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan, and raced away.

It was lucky that he and Obi-Wan had taken the tour of the museum upon their arrival on New Apsolon. He could remember each level and room. This level was used for storage, so they hadn't toured it. The floors and walls were bare and damp. On the floor overhead were the cells and torture rooms, as well as the offices. No doubt the Absolutes were camped there. Including Balog.

Qui-Gon accessed the turbolift to the next level. He strode out into the hall. He saw a figure ahead. It was a man dressed in a navy tunic. An Absolute. He froze when he saw Qui-Gon. Then he doubled back and ran the way he had come.

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon chased after him. No doubt he had gone to spread an alarm. The Absolutes weren't expecting invaders, but they would meet them with resistance.

He burst into the room just as the Absolute activated a row of attack droids that had been on display. To Qui-Gon's surprise, the attack droids immediately lined up. They were operational. The Absolutes had armed the displays in the museum.

This was more sophisticated weaponry than Eritha's droids. Blaster fire was erratic and came from the droids' chests, foreheads, and hands. They could wheel and maneuver and twist themselves into flexible positions.

Qui-Gon was outnumbered, but he refused to be outmatched. Blaster fire rocketed toward him in a fiery curtain. Every part of him was vulnerable. His lightsaber had to keep pace with the rapid fire as he took evasive action. He had a shock when he realized that he might have to retreat.

He felled two droids, but the others were relentless. Some rushed toward him, blasting fire. The others flanked him and aimed as they tried to get behind him. Qui-Gon felt sweat roll down his forehead, stinging his eyes. He used the Force to smash one against the wall, but it reformed and came after him again. He used his lightsaber to cut it in half.

He had never been happier to see Obi-Wan in his life. His Padawan suddenly leaped into the fray, lightsaber swinging. With Obi-Wan's help, Qui-Gon was able to regroup and smash the two droids to his left. The two Jedi swung wide and came at the droids' line from each end. They each felled two, then leaped toward the center of the line to destroy two more droids as they shifted into position.

Smoke rose, choking them. Obi-Wan took out the last droid, and they stumbled out of the small room.

Obi-Wan leaned over to take a breath of pure air. "Where do you think Balog is?"

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The question seemed to echo inside Qui-Gon's brain. He realized that he hadn't given much thought to Balog's whereabouts. He had just charged ahead. That wasn't like him.

I am not thinking clearly, he told himself. I am reacting, not acting.

He realized this meant he was on the edge of his control. But even as he recognized this, he recognized something equally chilling: *He did not care.*

And suddenly, he knew where Balog might be. Remembering the tour, he recalled a tech center on this floor. Since Balog had recently stolen the list from Irini, he was most likely accessing it on a datascreen. He would certainly waste no time erasing his name and looking for others to denounce.

Before he could answer Obi-Wan, more droids wheeled around the corner behind them. They felt a warming in the Force before the blaster fire began. Once again, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had to use every particle of concentration to defeat the agile droids. The blaster fire seemed to come from everywhere.

The droids were between them and the data center. Rage filled Qui-Gon at the delay. Every second that passed meant that Balog would have a chance to escape.

He charged at the droids, swinging his lightsaber in a constant arc, hardly noticing when blaster fire zinged near his ears or barely missed an arm or hand. He savagely swung at the droids, destroying one after another. Obi-Wan tried to protect him as best he could, but even he could not keep up with the fierceness of Qui-Gon's attack.

Qui-Gon broke through the line of droids, kicking one aside and cleaving it in two. He had always thought that giving in to rage would make him sloppy. Instead, he felt precise. He felt powerful. His rage filled him with purpose.

The droids were defeated, in pieces, smoking around him. He dashed ahead.

"Qui-Gon, wait!"

But he ignored his Padawan. He could not wait.

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With this new sharpness of mind, he remembered the exact location of the data room. He did not hesitate but threw open the door. He could hear Obi-Wan only steps behind him, and he felt a stab of disappointment. He wished Obi-Wan had stayed behind.

He wanted to meet Balog alone.

The squat, powerful man sat at a tech console. He spun around in his chair, a look of surprise on his face. So Eritha had not been able to reach him.

Qui-Gon took in the small dark eyes, the small pursed mouth, the round head. He focused his hatred on this man. Here was the man who had watched Tahl's health deteriorate slowly, day by agonizing day, and felt nothing. Here was the man who had not recognized that he was slowly crushing an extraordinary spirit.

This little, evil man.

The injustice of it staggered Qui-Gon. This man was alive. Tahl was dead. His vision blurred at the emotion that roared inside him.

Balog rose, kicking his chair out of his way. He reached for the blaster on his belt.

Qui-Gon smiled.

Obi-Wan stood next to him, his lightsaber held in a defensive stance, waiting for Balog to make the first move.

With one hand, Balog reached over to activate the comm unit on the tech console. "I need help in the data center. Send attack droids – "

With a casual gesture, Qui-Gon buried his lightsaber in the console. Sparks flew, and smoke curled from the circuits.

Balog fired. Obi-Wan sprang forward to deflect it.

The blaster fire was nothing to Qui-Gon. It was merely a momentary barrier between himself and Balog. Balog was his prey. A collection of skin and muscles and bones that must be brought down in a heap.

His lightsaber moved like a trick of light, so fast that each stroke was a memory. It was so easy to deflect Balog's pathetic

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fire. Panic rose in Balog's eyes and made him clumsy. He dropped his blaster. He tried to run, but his legs tangled in the chair he had kicked away. He fell with a crash to the floor.

At last, Qui-Gon's enemy lay at his feet, just as he'd imagined. He stood over Balog, his lightsaber high, prepared for the stroke that would bring him so much satisfaction.

"No, Qui-Gon."

The voice seemed to come from far away, yet it was so close to his ear. It confused him.

He turned and met Obi-Wan's eyes. He felt he was seeing him from a great distance. Confusion swept over him.

Then it was as though clouds parted, and clarity came. He saw so much in a moment. In his Padawan's steady glance he saw both fear and compassion.

He was no longer far away. The distance compressed, and he was in the same room with Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon returned to himself, and saw how far he had gone. The dark side had risen in his blood. He had known it and encouraged it. Shaking, he deactivated his lightsaber and tucked it back in his belt.

He had come close to taking a life out of revenge. Only he would know how close. He would never forget it. He would never allow himself to forget it.

Balog closed his eyes in relief. Obi-Wan stood over him and reached for his comlink as Mace and Bant entered the room.

Chapter Eighteen

The four Jedi stood on the landing platform high above the city of New Apsolon. Qui-Gon looked down at the stately gray buildings, the curving streets and wide boulevards. From high above it was easy to tell where the grand Civilized Sector began and the smaller, twisting neighborhoods of the Workers ended.

Manex had lent them the finest consular ship on New Apsolon, as well as his personal pilot. Tahl's body had been loaded aboard in a small room fragrant with native flowers. The Jedi would accompany her on her last journey back to the Temple.

They left behind them a government still torn by division. Alani, Eritha, and Balog had been arrested. There had been a huge outcry at the arrest of the twins. Both Workers and many Civilized did not believe they could be corrupt. Not the daughters of Ewane. Irini was recovering in a med center, but charges had been filed against her. The Worker movement had lost Irini and Lenz in one stroke. They were struggling to find new leaders.

The turbolift doors opened and Manex stepped out. He was dressed in a rich robe of his favorite shade of green. He walked forward and bowed to the Jedi.

"The people of New Apsolon owe you a great debt," he said.

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"There is still unrest on New Apsolon," Mace said. "But the government will proceed with honesty."

Manex nodded. "The elections are now set for next week. Other Legislators have stepped forward to run. I know the Absolute movement has been damaged, but it has not disappeared completely. We still have enemies to fight. No doubt there are more troubles ahead as the Committee to Reinstate Justice deals with the list of Absolute informers. But I have committed myself to my world. If I'm elected, I'll take up where Roan left off."

"If you need us again, we will come," Mace told him.

Qui-Gon turned away. *I will not be the one to come*, he thought. He would never return to New Apsolon again.

"We thank you for your transport," Mace said to Manex. "And for all you have done."

Manex's brown eyes were full of sorrow. "I cannot begin to replace what you lost here. I can only promise you my service for the rest of my life, should you need it."

Manex signaled the pilot on board to lower the ramp of the ship. Then, with a final bow, he walked away.

Qui-Gon stood a short distance from the others. He saw Bent move closer to Obi-Wan.

"Is Qui-Gon all right?" she asked in a low, concerned tone.

"I don't know," his Padawan said. "But he will be."

Will I? Qui-Gon wondered with a curious detachment.

Obi-Wan glanced at Bant. "Are we all right?"

Qui-Gon felt that if it were possible for his heart to be touched, it would be, at the warm look in Bant's eyes. He remembered when he and Tahl had been that close.

"Of course," she told Obi-Wan.

He owed Obi-Wan a word, too. He called him over to his side.

"I need to thank you," he told him. "When I stood over Balog with hate in my heart, you saved me. It was the sound of my name that brought me back to myself."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan looked at him, puzzled. "But I didn't speak."

Qui-Gon's heart swelled. It had been Tahl. Of course it had been Tahl. The voice had been so near and yet so far away. It was her voice, soft and warm, a voice he had heard rarely, and a tone, he now realized, she had reserved only for him.

She was still with him. It should have helped him to know that. But instead, fresh agony ripped through him. It was not enough to have her voice in a time of need. He needed her physical presence. He needed her warm and breathing, close enough to touch, near enough to exchange a private smile.

Obi-Wan must have seen something on his face. He placed a hand on Qui-Gon's shoulder. Qui-Gon did not feel the pressure. He did not want to feel his Padawan's touch. He was grateful to Obi-Wan for his compassion. He owed a debt to Mace and Bant for their silent understanding.

Yet he could not stand to be with them.

Qui-Gon turned away from them and strode up the ramp. He would spend the journey back to Coruscant watching over Tahl alone.

He knew one thing: This grief must be borne, and it would not be a load that lessened with time. It would appear and reappear. It would gather and lose strength, and when he thought it was diminishing, it would rise again. It was too big for Jedi acceptance to contain it.

And what does that mean, to be a Jedi and be unable to accept? Qui-Gon wondered. It was a question for another time.

He entered the ship and did not look behind him. He was leaving on New Apsolon the possibility of a different life, a life that he had looked forward to with a joy he did not know existed in the galaxy. He would return to the life he had, a life of solitary service. He did not know where else to go.

He hoped to find satisfaction in that service again someday. That day seemed far away. For now, he headed for the small room where Tahl lay for his last, long good-bye.

Book Seventeen
The Only Witness

Chapter One

Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn sighed deeply as he strode down the hall. The Council felt he had been inactive for too long, and he knew it. They had been patient as he mourned the death of his dear friend Tahl. And now they were waiting for him to decide he was ready to resume his active life as a Jedi.

Except he wasn't. And he was not sure he ever would be.

Qui-Gon turned a corner, heading for the Council room. The Council had summoned him, but hadn't explained why. Perhaps they had grown tired of waiting. Perhaps they were going to send him on a mission anyway.

Maybe it is for the best, Qui-Gon thought, trying to make himself believe it. He'd been attempting to convince himself of so many things lately, though he did not often succeed. *And at least it will be good for Obi-Wan.*

Qui-Gon's Padawan walked noiselessly beside him, his face a mask of perfect calm. Qui-Gon knew what lurked underneath. He could feel the tension growing between him and his apprentice. He sensed that Obi-Wan wanted to speak, and yet he was uncharacteristically silent.

Though Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had never been far apart over the last few months, in many ways Qui-Gon had deserted his apprentice. He wished he could say something to reassure Obi-

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Wan. Soothing speeches used to come so easily. But Jedi wisdom felt somehow hollow to him now. He would not offer the boy empty words.

Pausing outside the Council room, Obi-Wan turned to his Master. Qui-Gon saw he was about to speak, but before he could say anything the Council room doors hissed open.

Only three of the twelve Council seats were filled. Qui-Gon was not surprised to see so few members present. He greeted his old friends and stood before them in the familiar circle.

Yoda, Mace Windu, and Plo Koon thanked the Jedi team for coming. Their eyes passed briefly over Obi-Wan, then rested on Qui-Gon. They were obviously concerned.

Qui-Gon could feel the Council members looking deep inside him, trying to determine if sending him on a mission was the right decision. He was surprised to find that he could not hold their gaze. Rather than lifting his burden of sorrow, their caring made him painfully aware of the weight he was bearing.

Looking past the seated Masters to the Coruscant skyline, Qui-Gon tried to settle his feelings. He wondered yet again why he could not let this flood of emotion flow through him. He had been taught to do just that by great teachers – some now seated before him – and it had always worked. Yet it did not work now.

Obi-Wan shifted his feet, and Qui-Gon realized that the silence had gone on for too long.

"We've received a request from Senator Crote of Frego," Mace Windu began at last. "He has asked for Jedi assistance in transporting a witness to Coruscant to testify before the Senate."

Qui-Gon nodded. Protecting important witnesses was routine for the Jedi. As he'd suspected, this first mission would be a simple assignment – something easy. A distraction. That was why there were only three members of the Council present.

"A simple task it is not," Yoda said, as if in answer to Qui-Gon's thoughts. "There is much danger on Frego."

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Mace Windu continued to study Qui-Gon's face. "We would not send you if we did not think you were ready. Do you feel ready, Qui-Gon?"

Qui-Gon did not know. He had no desire to leave the Temple, or even his simple rooms. But it would not be fair to Obi-Wan to live in seclusion forever.

"I am ready," Qui-Gon replied, more firmly than he believed.

Qui-Gon could feel Obi-Wan's relief. It rushed from him like a breath that had been held for a long time and finally released. The Council members, too, seemed to relax upon hearing Qui-Gon's words. They stopped searching his thoughts. They had the answer they wanted. Qui-Gon hoped he had made the right decision.

"As Yoda said, the situation is complicated," Plo Koon said. "We've asked Jocasta Nu to give you all of the information you need before you depart." He gestured toward the Temple archives.

"Go now you must," Yoda added gravely.

"We fear the danger for the witness is growing. The sooner you get to Frego, the better," Mace said, dismissing Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan with a wave of his hand. "May the Force be with you."

Qui-Gon nodded and walked slowly out of the circular room, followed by Obi-Wan. Even after hearing the Masters' cautionary words, he felt sure that the mission would be simple to complete... as long as his spirit didn't fail him.

Jocasta Nu was a thin, wispy Jedi with long graying hair that she wore in a tight bun. She stood up from her work table the moment the Jedi entered the room. The picture of efficiency, she gathered her materials and gestured toward another, larger table, asking Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan to take a seat.

"I understand that time is of the essence," Jocasta said. She did not bother with introductions. It did not matter. Qui-Gon had encountered the Temple archivist before, and surely Obi-

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Wan knew who she was. She briefed many Jedi teams before they went out on important missions.

In the past Qui-Gon had preferred to use other sources to get his information. He had grown used to working with Tahl, and hadn't met with Jocasta that often since he took Obi-Wan as an apprentice four years ago.

"The witness is Lena Cobral." Jocasta showed them a holo image of a slight young woman with dark hair twisted into an elaborate bun. "She is the widowed wife of Rutin Cobral."

The image of the young woman vanished and a man appeared in her place. He was young, fairly tall, with short brown hair and a relaxed smile. "Rutin was recently killed, and his murderer is still at large."

"Is that unusual?" Qui-Gon asked. "I thought Frego was a planet ruled by criminals."

Jocasta looked slightly annoyed at the interruption, but continued. "The Cobral family is the largest power on Frego. They are in charge of a crime ring that has successfully controlled the government for twenty years. Rutin's father died a few years ago, of natural causes. It was widely believed that Rutin was being groomed to take over, although he has two brothers who are older than he is. Solan is the oldest and the new leader of the Cobral."

A shorter, stockier version of Rutin appeared on the screen. Besides his brother's height, Solan also lacked his thick head of hair and genuine smile. He was nearly bald and his scowl looked permanent.

"Solan is well known on his planet, widely feared and respected. He gets what he needs through threats, violence, and influence."

Now that Jocasta was through imparting information, she was prepared to answer Qui-Gon's question.

"It is not unusual for murders to go uninvestigated on Frego. But it is unusual for a favored member of the Cobral family to be killed, particularly without vengeance."

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Though Qui-Gon's expression did not change, he felt a fresh wave of grief wash through him. He longed more than ever for Tahl – for her cynicism, her quick mind, and her habit of dispensing information in a way that naturally led Qui-Gon's thoughts in the proper direction.

Qui-Gon reminded himself that theirs was a relationship that had taken years to develop. And that the connection he had with Tahl was one he would never have with the Temple archivist. Or anyone else, probably.

"Lena married into the Cobral family three years ago," Jocasta went on. "There was a rumor that Rutin no longer wanted to be involved in his family's dealings. Although he could not easily divorce himself from the crime business, Senator Crote has told us that Rutin was prepared to testify before the Senate against his family. He wanted to put an end to the crime ring altogether. Not long after Rutin agreed to testify, he was killed." Jocasta took a breath, but did not allow more than a second to pass before going on.

"Last night we received a secret communication from Lena. Senator Crote did as well. She has decided to take up her husband's cause and testify against the Cobral herself." Jocasta pushed several documents on a datapad across the table toward the Jedi. "Everything you need is here."

Qui-Gon stood and took the datapad. "Thank you," he said curtly. "We may be contacting you if we need further assistance."

"Of course," Jocasta nodded. "May the Force be with you."

Qui-Gon nodded blankly in return. How could he trust that the Force would be with him? Where had it been when he'd needed it the most? He and Tahl had pledged their love for each other. But nothing – not that love, not the Jedi, not the Force – had been able to save her.

It did not take long for Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan to gather supplies for the short journey. Soon they were stepping onto the freighter that would take them to Frego.

Jude Watson

Distracted and exhausted, Qui-Gon was anxious to retire to his quarters as soon as they were on board. He was about to say as much to Obi- Wan when his Padawan spoke.

"Master, I know that these last few months have been hard on you." Obi-Wan reached out a hand toward Qui-Gon's shoulder but let it drop, barely brushing his Master's brown sleeve. "And I... well, I can't help remembering what you told me when Bant was missing in the Temple. You said that the darkest time is the time when it is most important that you follow the Jedi Code. If you let your emotions fl -"

"Thank you, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon cut him off. "You have learned well what I've taught you. One day you will make a fine Jedi Master." He turned and made his way quickly toward his quarters. He could sense the boy behind him, standing, bewildered.

Qui-Gon knew his apprentice was only trying to make him feel better. But he could not bear to listen to the wisdom that was now failing him. He simply wanted to be alone.

Chapter Two

Obi-Wan stood silently, watching the planet Frego grow larger on the freighter's view-screen. Qui-Gon had not emerged from his quarters during the journey. Obi-Wan was not sure if he should disturb him, even now that they were drawing close to their destination. He desperately wanted to give Qui-Gon the same comfort his Master had given him so many times. But the more he tried, the further Qui-Gon retreated. The gulf between them seemed to be growing wider, and Obi-Wan was at a loss. How could he span the distance alone?

"That must be Frego."

Qui-Gon's voice surprised Obi-Wan and filled him with relief. He would not have to disturb his Master's solitude after all.

"And that glowing spot must be the capitol city of Rian," Qui-Gon continued.

Obi-Wan could tell that Qui-Gon was still sad and distracted. It was almost like standing beside a ghost. But at least he was speaking. He was making an effort.

As they exited the craft, Obi-Wan felt on edge. It was up to him to focus on this mission. He could not depend on his Master in his emotionally wounded state.

Obi-Wan did not think the Cobral family had been alerted to their arrival, but a planet ruled by criminals was always a

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dangerous place. He half expected to see dark dealings and black market bargains right in the freighter hangar, but there was only one person present as the Jedi disembarked – and she looked at them without interest. Obi-Wan relaxed a little, until the freighter captain slid down the ramp toward him.

"I'll be taking off as soon as possible, if that's okay," he said nervously. "I don't want to spend any more time here than is absolutely necessary, with the Cobral airways tax and all."

Obi-Wan nodded. Though he did not know exactly what the pilot was referring to, he could tell it was not pleasant, and most likely not legal. He thanked the captain for their safe passage and watched him slip back inside his craft.

As soon as the ship's door shut, the lone woman in the hangar approached the Jedi.

"I trust you had a pleasant journey from..." she paused.

"Coruscant," Obi-Wan finished for her. "Are you Lena?"

"No," the woman said, lowering her hood to reveal closely cut hair and a youthful face. "I am Mica, but I will take you to Lena now." Mica glanced around the hangar once more.

She's nervous, Obi-Wan thought. He drew a deep breath and concentrated on the Force. But he did not sense danger, only Mica's fear.

"Follow behind me, but not too close. If I am approached I will pretend not to know you." Mica's eyes were large and dark and she turned them on Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan in turn, waiting for each to nod in agreement.

"We will do as you ask," Obi-Wan assured her.

Raising her hood, Mica started out of the hangar at a brisk pace.

Obi-Wan enjoyed being introduced to a new planet on foot. Qui-Gon had taught him that the slower pace was best for observation, and there was much to observe in Rian. None of it was what Obi-Wan had expected.

The streets were clean; the footpaths were filled with Fregans carrying colorful bundles and walking unhurriedly together. Just a

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short distance from the municipal hangar, stalls lined the paths. Food vendors sold heaps of fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, and grains, shouting out prices and greeting regulars. Farther into the open market more vendors sold household goods and even crafts. Everywhere people seemed happy and relaxed.

In the heart of the market the crowd was so dense and there was so much to see that Obi-Wan nearly lost sight of Mica. But whenever he looked up he saw Qui-Gon's eyes trained on the gray peak of Mica's hood. He did not seem to be taking in the surroundings as he normally would. His thoughts were clearly elsewhere.

Obi-Wan would have liked to discuss his observations with his Master. Wasn't it unusual that a planet controlled by criminals would have such a seemingly happy populace? But he was quite sure Qui-Gon wasn't thinking about the Fregans, so he kept quiet.

At last the market stalls ended and the crowd thinned. After following Mica through a maze of dark but clean alleys, the woman stopped and beckoned the Jedi toward her. When they drew close Mica punched a control pad and a large warehouse door groaned open to reveal a huge room filled with abandoned equipment.

"We're here," Mica said, waving the Jedi in first and taking a last look up and down the alley before shutting the door. "I am the only one who knows where Lena is hiding. Besides you. It is important that you are never followed to this spot."

"Of course." Obi-Wan nodded.

At the top of several flights of durasteel stairs, the yawning spaces and hulking machinery gave way to a more hospitable living space. Standing with her back to the entrance among several mismatched but comfortable-looking couches was the woman Obi-Wan had seen on Jocasta Nu's holoscreen. Lena Cobral.

Mica cleared her throat to announce their arrival. Lena turned.

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"You've made it," she said, bringing her hands together and offering both of them to Qui-Gon and then Obi-Wan, and finally embracing Mica. "I'm so pleased. Was your journey very difficult?"

"It passed quickly," Qui-Gon told her before introducing himself and Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan was glad that Qui-Gon had emerged again from silence, for he was not entirely sure he would have been able to manage the conversation so easily.

Lena Cobral had been attractive on the holoscreen, but in person she was stunning. Her long dark hair spilled over her shoulders, framing her face and dark eyes like Mica's. She was only a few years older than Obi-Wan, which surprised him. Like the Fregans in the street, her demeanor was relaxed. She greeted the Jedi as if they were old friends or honored guests at a party, not political escorts.

"Please sit," Lena said, guiding the Jedi to the chairs. "You need refreshment. Perhaps some Kopi tea?"

Before the Jedi could protest Lena was pouring a warm dark liquid into cups. It looked slightly orange and tasted delicious.

"My cousin Mica brings me everything now that I am in hiding," Lena smiled at the silent Mica. "She brought me this tea yesterday. And today she has brought you to me as well." Lena turned her infectious smile on the Jedi; Obi-Wan found that it was nearly impossible not to smile back.

"She is too good to me." Lena's upbeat voice gave no clue that there was any real threat. "She insists on staying with me without any thought of the danger to herself. I know I should not allow it."

"You are the one who does not give any thought to putting yourself in danger," Mica said softly.

As Lena watched her cousin stand and leave the room, Obi-Wan thought he caught a first glimpse of tension and fear on her face. He looked at Qui-Gon to see if he too had noticed it, but

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Qui-Gon had retreated inside himself once more and was gazing into his tea cup.

"I'm sorry," Lena apologized, suddenly placing her hand to her brow. "I'm wasting your time, and I have not been entirely honest."

Obi-Wan sat up and Qui-Gon placed his cup on the table. They did not speak, but waited for Lena to continue.

"It is true that I need an escort to Coruscant. And it is true that I wish to testify against the Cobral. I must complete the task that Rutin started. The task he died for." Lena's voice caught and she stood, turning toward the shrouded windows before continuing. "In so many ways it is my fault. I did not mean to fall in love with him. I did not know he was a Cobral. But love isn't a choice, is it?"

Obi-Wan thought he saw Qui-Gon nod slightly.

"Before we married, Rutin promised he could stop the crime, but he could not stand to be cast out of his family. He was his parents' favorite and he loved them. He hoped that he could convince them to change their ways. He was not content to remove himself; he wanted to stop it all." Lena spoke more quickly as she went on, as if she could not stop the flow of words.

"But then his brother Solan found out that Rutin was trying to change things. Furious, he went to their father. Rutin could not close the crime ring from the inside. So he decided to try to close it from the outside. It was the hardest decision he ever made. I wanted him to get out, but I begged him not to risk his life. He insisted. For me, he said. He did it for me." Lena paused again and turned back toward the Jedi. Her dark eyes were moist with tears.

Obi-Wan felt she was looking only at him, and her eyes bore straight into his heart. It was as if she were searching him, checking to see if he had the strength and courage to help her. If he could be trusted.

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Obi-Wan knew instinctively that he trusted her. There was something about the way she carried herself, about the way she spoke. She was not lying to them. He could sense her fear, yes, but also her honesty. And he could feel her strength. Lena Cobral was not a coward.

"That is why I must carry out his plan," Lena said, straightening. "I can't let Rutin's death be for nothing. I will testify, I will stop the crime. But..."

Obi-Wan leaned in. So far the story was as he expected. But what?

"I don't have any solid evidence to bring before the Senate." Lena sighed. "Rutin worked very hard to protect me. Although I have heard many things, as all Fregans have, I have only my word against theirs."

Qui-Gon stood. Obi-Wan could tell by the look on his face that he was not happy about being fooled. They were sent to escort a witness in danger and now it seemed their witness had no testimony.

"Please," Lena said, taking Qui-Gon's large hand. "I beg you, stay until I have the proper evidence. I know it exists – lists and dates, accounts and records of the Cobrals' crimes. With your help – "

"We were sent only to protect you. If you cannot testify we must return to Coruscant alone," Qui-Gon said flatly.

Obi-Wan flushed, unable to believe what he was hearing. How could Qui-Gon deny this woman help?

Chapter Three

"Master!" Obi-Wan said, more sharply than he'd intended. "I..." He stopped, realizing that it would not be good to discuss their differing opinions in front of Lena. "I would like to speak with you," he finished.

Obi-Wan nodded to Lena and walked quickly toward the stairs and down one flight. Qui-Gon's footsteps followed. When he reached the landing, Obi-Wan whirled.

"Master, you can't mean to leave this woman here. She is obviously scared and in danger!" he burst out.

"She lied to us about having evidence, Obi-Wan. Who's to say she is not lying about the danger as well?" Qui-Gon said calmly.

"Her fear is real," Obi-Wan said. "Surely you can feel that. We cannot abandon her." His face felt warm. He had not spoken so strongly to his Master since before Tahl's death, but since then Qui-Gon seemed to feel nothing outside of himself.

Qui-Gon gazed at his Padawan for some time. Obi-Wan did not look away. He would not allow Qui-Gon to walk away from this.

"We can stay for two days, that is all. If she does not have the evidence by that time we will return to Coruscant without her," Qui-Gon decided. "But I do not think this is a good idea. You are letting your emotions guide you."

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"I will not regret it," Obi-Wan said tightly.

"That is my hope," his Master replied.

Anger and frustration welled up inside Obi-Wan. He started back up the stairs without another word. Hadn't Qui-Gon let his emotions guide him in the past? If only his Master would allow himself to feel some of those emotions now he would understand. They were making the right decision. Lena – and Frego – needed them.

Struggling to let go of his frustration, Obi-Wan paused before reentering the living quarters. Lena heard the Jedi on the stairs and turned. Her face was full of hope.

"We will stay two days," Obi-Wan told her with a smile.

"We will protect you while we are here, but that is all. We will not gather evidence against the Cobral," Qui-Gon added.

It was enough. Lena threw her arms around Obi-Wan's neck. "Thank you, " she said in his ear. "Thank you. It is more than I can ask."

Obi-Wan felt his face and neck grow warm as he hugged Lena back awkwardly. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Qui-Gon and, behind him, Mica. Neither of them were smiling.

"Two days will be plenty, but there is no time to waste," Lena said. She dashed from the room and returned a moment later with a robe similar to Mica's. She quickly coiled her hair and pinned it on her head before covering it with a hood.

"I'm coming with you," Mica stated.

Lena shook her head. "There's no reason to put you in danger, too."

Obi-Wan thought he saw a flicker of annoyance in Mica's expression, but she was silent as the Jedi and Lena left the apartment.

Lena's manner was very brusque and her expression one of pure determination as she led the Jedi outside into the alley. Obi-Wan noticed her brows were drawn before she covered them with a pair of dark goggles that hid most of her face.

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Lena moved through the streets even faster than her cousin. She led the Jedi from the dark, towering warehouses to a neighborhood filled with tall, sparkling buildings. Bubble like turbolifts silently glided up and down their outside walls.

Lena came to an abrupt halt a dozen meters away from a particularly large and grand-looking building. Three imposing men stood on guard outside the bubble turbolift.

"We'll have to go in the back way," Lena said, finally turning toward the Jedi. She sighed sadly. "I haven't been back to my apartment since –"

"Your apartment?" Qui-Gon interrupted.

Obi-Wan guessed that his Master was not entirely surprised about their destination, but that he didn't think going inside was a good idea. Obi-Wan wasn't sure it was, either. But he wanted to help Lena.

"Are you certain that's wise?" Qui-Gon finished.

"We have no choice," Lena explained. "There's vital information inside. I need it to testify."

Qui-Gon did not reply as Lena turned and made her way down a narrow alley to a back entrance. Luckily this one was not guarded. Lena punched a code into a small panel and the door slid open. But there was no turbolift on this side of the building. They had to walk up thirty-seven flights of stairs.

By the time they reached the top floor, all of them were out of breath. But Lena did not pause to rest. Instead she led them around a corner to what looked like a duracrete wall. It wasn't until he got up close that Obi-Wan realized it was actually a concealed door. Lena pressed a small button concealed inside a panel, and the door slid open.

Before Obi-Wan could even get a look inside, Lena gasped and put a hand to her mouth. They were standing in what had once been a beautiful parlor. But the apartment had been ransacked, and piles of debris littered the floor. Everything was ruined.

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The rich fabrics that had covered the furniture were torn to shreds and strewn across the rooms. Tables and bureaus were smashed. Drawers were overturned and shelves cleared, their ripped and broken contents randomly spread across every surface.

The apartment had been lavishly decorated, but now it looked like the inside of a garbage scow. Whoever was responsible for the ransacking had done a thorough job. Even the carpets had been pulled up and hacked to pieces.

Beside him, Lena leaned heavily on Obi-Wan's arm. "I should have guessed that they would search," she said, forlorn. She leaned down and picked up the pieces of a small stone carving. She turned them over in her hand, and her eyes welled with tears.

Obi-Wan wanted to comfort her, but wasn't sure what to say. He squeezed her arm gently.

"I suppose you should be glad you weren't at home," Qui-Gon replied dryly. He obviously hadn't noticed Lena's expression, and Obi-Wan felt a flash of annoyance. How could his Master be so insensitive?

Lena drew a deep breath and let go of Obi-Wan before picking her way carefully through the mess toward the back of the apartment. Qui-Gon stayed near the lift doors. Obi-Wan followed close behind Lena, in case she needed his support again. The apartment did not look like it had been searched so much as destroyed.

Her face full of sadness, Lena surveyed the damage. She paused once to pick up a trinket that was not entirely shattered, then placed it on a shelf still barely attached to the wall. Obi-Wan wondered how long it would stay there before sliding off.

"How strange!" Lena exclaimed as she walked into her bedroom, at the end of a long hall. Nothing in this room had been touched. The furnishings stood upright. The bed was made. Even the portrait on the wall was straight.

Obi-Wan stepped closer to the portrait. It was a picture of Lena and Rutin. They stood together in front of a waterfall, their

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eyes locked on each other. Something about the portrait disturbed Obi-Wan, but before he could place the feeling, the portrait and the wall it was on swung aside to reveal a small office.

"It's where Rutin worked in the evenings," Lena explained, walking through the secret door. "All of his family files are stored here. I just can't believe that whoever searched the house didn't –" Lena trailed off as she activated the computer screen.

Blue light and horror shone on Lena's face as a message flashed on the screen:

YOU CANNOT STOP US.
YOU CAN ONLY DIE TRYING.

Chapter Four

Qui-Gon entered the back room just in time to see the message flash a final time. Then the computer went dead.

Lena sank into a chair. "They've erased the evidence," she said. "They've erased everything."

For a moment Lena's determination was replaced by desperation. Qui-Gon was surprised to feel a similar desperation coming from Obi-Wan. He gazed at him thoughtfully. This was unusual behavior for his Padawan.

Qui-Gon turned his attention to the matter at hand. "Was the computer connected to a network of some kind?" he asked.

"I don't think so," Lena said. Then she shook her head firmly. "No. Rutin would not have kept the information here if it was."

"And no one else had access to the information?" Qui-Gon questioned.

"Well, the information was no secret within the family. They all know what's going on, but they are careful not to leave a trail. Solan makes sure of that." Lena stood up and walked back into her bedroom, talking more to herself than the Jedi. "Still, Rutin managed to construct a trail. Any of them could, but Solan..."

Qui-Gon could see that Lena was already recovering from the setback. She was formulating a new plan. Qui-Gon could not help but admire her resolve. And yet, if she loved her husband as

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she claimed, she was remarkably strong in the aftermath of his death. He thought perhaps she was deceiving them.

"They all know," Lena said again, louder. "And one of them might just help." Lena turned and began picking her way back toward the lift.

"Come on," she beckoned the Jedi. "I may need your protection even more now. We're going to the Cobral Estate."

"Really?" Qui-Gon asked. "Are you sure that's the best plan of action?"

"Only my mother-in-law lives there now. She's not part of the family business. Taking the risk will be worth it. It has to be."

In the basement of the building, Lena and the Jedi climbed into a large landspeeder. Within moments they were zipping outside the city, toward the home of Lena's mother-in-law, Zanita Cobral.

"We've always gotten along," Lena explained as they skimmed the surface of the planet. "Rutin was her favorite son. He was the youngest. Losing him was devastating for her, for all of us."

Qui-Gon had trouble focusing his attention on Lena from his seat in the rear. As he forced himself to stay present, in the back of his mind he wondered if coming on this mission had been a bad idea. It called for subtle judgments he wasn't certain he was equipped to make. He felt as if he was moving through a fog of unclear emotions.

"Zanita may be the only person on the planet who is not under Solan's thumb," Lena said to Obi-Wan. "She's the only one who can help. I just hope she wants to."

The Cobral Estate sat on a high ridge overlooking Rian. When the large home was within sight Lena activated a transparisteel roof, which quickly covered the travelers. Then she pushed another button and the transparisteel turned a dark shade of gray.

"When we reach the gate you'll have to duck down," Lena said. "The Cobrals don't like strangers."

Qui-Gon wondered how much the Cobrals would like seeing Lena. Even though she'd said that she and her mother-in-law

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were on good terms, her presence might stir things up rather than settle them.

At least they had someone to remind them of Rutin. But who did Qui-Gon have to remind him of Tahl? No one had known her as he had. Fresh memories came to him every day. There was no one to share them with.

Crouched in the back and covered by his own robe, Qui-Gon felt Lena tense. He could tell it was not just apprehension about the meeting with Zanita. Something else was happening.

"That's Solan's speeder," she whispered to the Jedi. "And his brother Bard's. The whole family is here."

Qui-Gon raised his head enough to see a number of luxury vehicles parked in the bay outside the mansion. There was no doubt that the Cobrals possessed extraordinary wealth.

"Maybe we should come back later," Obi-Wan suggested gently from the front seat.

"No. I don't have time," Lena said with her familiar resolve. "We'll sneak in, and I'll find a way to get Zanita alone. Or maybe I'll find what I need on my own and we won't need her help after all. We might be able to get additional information. Having several of the Cobrals present could turn out to be a good thing..."

Or a deadly one, Qui-Gon thought.

Lena parked her speeder at the far end of the row, next to a metal statue.

"We can get in through the galley," she said, motioning with her head toward a small entrance.

Qui-Gon watched as Lena and Obi-Wan moved silently into position by the galley door. Moments later a cooking servant emerged. He did not notice as Lena slipped her foot into the door, preventing it from closing. When the servant rounded the edge of the building, Qui-Gon slipped into the galley after Lena and Obi-Wan.

The entrance had been too easy.

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The cooking quarters were vast, with rows of gleaming countertops and food storage units. Servants bustled about, busily preparing a large meal.

Lena waited until most of the servants had their backs to the door, then pulled up her hood and walked through the quarters. She carried herself with such authority that nobody bothered to ask who she was or where she was going.

Soon after entering a spectacularly long hallway covered in lush, thick carpet, she ducked into a small room and pulled Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon in after her. The room held several holoscreens.

"This used to be a guard station," Lena explained. "But when her husband died Zanita didn't think she needed as much protection, so it's no longer used."

Qui-Gon felt slightly relieved. At least there was an explanation for the easy entrance.

Lena adjusted one of the holoscreens until it showed a large dining room filled with people.

"It's Bard's birthday," Lena said with relief. A large Fregan birth celebration banner lay across the dining table. "I should have remembered."

The crowd milled about the room, smiling and carrying glasses filled with red liquid. At first glance it looked like any other party. Qui-Gon looked harder.

"There's Zanita," Lena said, pointing to a tall older woman dressed in a black gown covered in tiny smokats. A large scarf was wrapped attractively around her head like a turban. In spite of her age she was easily the most striking person in the room. Qui-Gon was surprised by her commanding presence and the way she set people around her at ease – laughing, smiling, and making sure they were taken care of. Then something else caught his eye.

"Is that Solan?" he asked quietly, pointing at a scowling man in the corner.

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"Yes, how did you know?" Lena asked. Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows but said nothing. His eyes stayed trained on Solan. Like Zanita, the frowning man was surrounded by a large group of people. But none of the people near Solan seemed to be enjoying his company. They simply stood nervously by.

Suddenly Solan stood. A woman next to him rushed to take his empty cup and napkin. Someone else asked if they could get anything for him, but he brushed them off with a wave of his hand. Solan approached the guest of honor, a man shorter than him but who otherwise bore a striking resemblance to him. It was the middle brother, Bard.

Casually tossing an arm over Bard's shoulder, Solan interrupted the conversation and steered him toward the outer edges of the party. He spoke in hushed tones.

"They're all afraid of him," Obi-Wan remarked.

Qui-Gon was glad to see the stiffening shoulders of the younger brother had not escaped the attention of his apprentice. "Exactly," said Qui-Gon. "Even his family is fearful."

Lena held up a hand to silence the Jedi. "Zanita's leaving the party," she whispered. "This is my chance."

Without another word Lena slipped out the door, leaving the Jedi to watch her on the holoscreen. She made her way down the long hallway toward the library. It was a large room, with towering shelves of important-looking books and polished furniture. Zanita was inside, apparently taking a moment to relax.

Qui-Con felt a strange unease. In spite of Zanita's pleasing manner he did not think the meeting would go well.

Obi-Wan leaned close to the screen. Lena entered the library unseen by the other guests.

The look on Zanita's face when she saw her daughter-in-law was one of sheer pleasure. The older woman stood and embraced Lena, holding her close for a long time.

Obi-Wan fiddled with the projection controls beneath the screen, tuning out the party guests until all they heard were the voices of Lena and Zanita in the library.

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"But, my dear, why would you hide from your family?" Zanita asked, her voice filled with concern.

"I was afraid," Lena explained. "And without Rutin, I didn't know what you would think of me.

"You will always be a Cobral," Zanita said solemnly, looking thoughtfully at her daughter-in-law. "But why were you afraid?"

Lena hesitated, then lowered her voice. "I am afraid because I think Solan had Rutin Killed."

Zanita staggered back before sinking onto a large, comfortable- looking sofa. Her skin paled and she reached a shaking hand toward Lena.

"It was my greatest fear," Zanita whispered as tears sprang to her eyes. "I did not want it to be true. And yet, when I look into my heart, I know you are not lying."

She pulled a piece of embroidered cloth from her pocket and wiped her eyes before going on. "I tried to stop Solan, to make him see reason, but it was too late," she sobbed again. "And now Rutin is gone."

Kneeling beside her, Lena comforted Zanita as best she could. She also told Zanita all she knew of Rutin's plan to end the crime ring. "I know it will not be easy for you to hear, but now I am planning to testify against the family. Rutin's dearest wish has become mine as well. I want to stop the violence," Lena explained, looking into her mother-in-law's eyes. "And I need your help."

In the guard room, Qui-Gon detected a slight quaver in Lena's voice. He could not fault her, of course. She was asking Zanita to join her in betraying her own family – her own children.

Zanita kept her eyes on her lap, but let go of Lena's hand. Her commanding presence seemed somehow diminished as she sat unmoving on the sofa. At last she looked up at the portrait hanging on the library wall. It was a picture of three men, the Cobral brothers. Rutin stood proudly in the center.

"Yes," she breathed. "It must stop."

Chapter Five

Zanita sat quietly for another long moment. When she looked up, there were tears in her eyes. "There is a set of documents," she said slowly. "I think I can get them for you. But you must promise me that you will not link my name to the testimony in any way."

"Of course not, Zanita," Lena assured her. She squeezed her mother-in-law's shoulder. "I know the violence and corruption are not your doing."

Zanita seemed to become empowered while her mind worked. It reminded Qui-Gon of Lena. "It will take me some time to get the documents. Perhaps by tomorrow night," she said. "I must be very, very careful. If Solan were to suspect – "

Suddenly a loud voice boomed just outside the library door. Qui-Gon's face registered concern. It was a man's voice, and it sounded angry.

Lena let go of her mother-in-law's arm and put a finger to her lips. Without wasting a second she got to her feet and ducked behind a heavy curtain covering the library's transparisteel portal.

A moment later the door slid open and Solan thundered into the room. "Mother," he said sternly, looking at her as if she were a child who needed scolding. "What are you doing in here?"

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Zanita looked evenly at her son. She was not a child, and it appeared that she did not appreciate being treated like one. "I was just having a moment to myself," she replied simply. Her face showed no sign of fear.

Solan tapped his foot on the floor impatiently. "You are the hostess of your son's birthday celebration," he stated. "It is not appropriate for you to slip away to have a moment to yourself. If necessary you can do that when the party is over."

"Stop bullying me, Solan. This is my house, and I'll do as I like." She looked her son in the face.

Solan blinked and stepped backward. "Juno needs you in the kitchen," he said more quietly. "He is not clear about which service platters you would like to use for dinner."

"Fine. I will go and discuss it with him," Zanita replied.

"Good. Then come back to the party."

Zanita did not acknowledge the fact that her son had just given her an order. Instead she followed him easily out of the library. She did not turn around as the door quietly closed behind her.

After waiting a few moments, Lena left the room as well. Minutes later she met up with the Jedi in the guard station.

"I assume you heard all of that," she said. "He infuriates me, talking to his own mother like that. Sometimes I wish she'd really put him in his place." Her voice quieted. "But I suppose that might get her killed. "

Lena paused while her quick mind moved on to the next thought. Her eyes were suddenly lit with excitement. Qui-Gon wasn't sure if it was the thrill of escape or the result of the meeting with her mother-in-law.

"Isn't it great?" she asked, perhaps a little too brightly. "Zanita is going to help us. I knew she would. Leave it to a woman to understand that the violent ways of the crime world can only lead to destruction and hate."

Qui-Gon could not help but think of Jenna Zan Arbor, a mad female scientist who had conducted horrible experiments on live

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human subjects – including him. He knew many women who lived lives of crime and violence. But he didn't say anything.

"Anyway, I'm very relieved. The meeting couldn't have gone better."

"It does look as though your mother-in-law is willing to help you get testimony," Qui-Gon agreed. "Let's just hope she keeps her word."

Lena nodded as she turned back to the security screens. "We still have to get out of here without being discovered," she said. She looked at each screen in turn, noting the whereabouts of everyone in the house. Qui-Gon knew she was trying to figure out the best time to leave.

"Follow me," Lena said after a moment. She slid open the guard station door and peered into the hallway. She motioned to the Jedi, and they all stepped out of the room. Zanita was still in the cooking quarters with Juno, so they left through another, rarely used entrance at the side of the mansion.

As they made their way outside, Qui-Gon considered the Cobral family. On the surface they appeared like any other family – close and loving, but not without tension. Beneath the surface, however, lay dark ties. There was fear there, and possibly hatred as well.

Of course, this did not entirely surprise Qui-Gon. A family that ruled a planet with corruption and violence was bound to have a sinister web woven within it.

Distracted by his own thoughts, Qui-Gon did not sense any nearby danger. It was Obi-Wan who cried out first.

"Look out!" he shouted, pushing Qui-Gon and Lena away from their landspeeder.

As the three of them tumbled to the ground, a huge metal statue thundered down where they had been standing. It crashed into the front end of their landspeeder, missing them by mere centimeters.

Their vehicle was destroyed. And if not for a few seconds of warning, they might have been killed, too.

Chapter Six

The Jedi and Lena were still on the ground when Zanita and Juno came rushing out the cooking quarters door. Qui-Gon felt Lena tense at the sight of the servant, and for a brief moment Juno glared at her. But his face shifted quickly into a look of concern.

"Are you all right?" he asked, holding out a hand to help her up.

Lena got to her feet on her own and brushed herself off. "Fine," she replied briskly. She casually scanned the area to see if anyone else was coming. It was a good thing they had parked their vehicle on the opposite side of the mansion from the entertaining quarters.

Qui-Gon was impressed with Lena's composure. And he didn't need to glance at his Padawan to know that Obi-Wan was as well.

Zanita's turban was askew, and the older woman seemed slightly out of breath. But she did not show any surprise at the fact that Lena had come to her home with two companions she had never met.

"We really must strengthen the base of that statue," Juno said, eyeing the giant metal sculpture on the ground. "It's quite unsafe."

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"Quite," Qui-Gon agreed dryly.

"Zanita, do you remember Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn?" Lena asked, raising her eyebrows slightly at her mother-in-law. "They are friends of mine."

Qui-Gon knew instinctively that Lena was trying to lead her late husband's mother away from saying out loud, or even somehow suggesting, that she had never met them before. He guessed that this was because of Juno's presence.

"Of course," Zanita replied easily. "How nice to see you again."

Qui-Gon smiled with a graciousness he didn't feel. "And you as well," he said, taking her hand for a moment in the Fregan custom.

Juno appeared annoyed that he hadn't been introduced to the Jedi. Clearing his throat loudly, he stepped toward the group. "You must come inside and rest," he declared. "We have a medical droid who can examine you for injuries."

Qui-Gon tried not to grimace as he realized that a family like the Cobrals probably *needed* its own medical droid. But there was something odd about Juno's offer. Qui-Gon was quite sure that in spite of the look of concern he wore, the servant was not truly worried about their welfare. Perhaps he had other motives for wanting to get the group back inside the house.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, Juno," Zanita said pointedly. "Lena and her friends were just leaving." She looked around furtively. After the exchange with her son in the library, Qui-Gon guessed that the mention of going inside – or the possibility of someone coming out – made her nervous.

"You can borrow a landspeeder, Lena," she added. "It's the least I can do."

Lena smiled at her mother-in-law. "That would be most appreciated," she said. "Thank you, Zanita."

Juno scowled at Lena, then started off toward the vehicle storage building.

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"Lena knows where the landspeeders are housed, Juno," Zanita said. "And she can take either of mine. You don't need to direct her."

Juno's frown deepened, but he didn't say anything.

"We'd best be getting back inside," Zanita said brightly when Juno didn't move. "We have guests to attend to."

With a last look at the three visitors, Juno turned and followed his employer back into the cooking quarters.

"Another close one," Lena whispered, shivering slightly. "Rutin never liked Juno, and he gives me the creeps." She eyed the door Juno and Zanita had just disappeared through, then turned and started toward the vehicle hangar. "Let's get out of here before something else happens."

Minutes later Lena and the Jedi were on their way back into the city.

"It was nice of Zanita to offer up her land-speeder," Obi-Wan noted from the front seat.

"Very nice," Lena agreed. But she did not say anything else. She suddenly seemed to focus very hard on piloting the speeder.

Once again in the backseat, Qui-Gon considered the events of the last few hours. Though he didn't particularly want to admit it, he felt at a loss. He was not able to decipher whether Zanita or Lena were being honest – either with each other or himself and Obi-Wan.

Qui-Gon sighed. For the millionth time he wished that Tahl were still alive. Aside from the aching absence that still burned inside him, he knew that her sharp perception and intuition would uncover the truth. She would not be distracted by the composed, polished surfaces of these women. She would cut through all of that and get to their real intentions, their motives.

Qui-Gon bowed his head and tried to let the grief of missing Tahl move through him. Isn't that what Yoda had taught him – what he had repeatedly told his Padawan?

Allow yourself to feel the emotions, then let them go. Qui-Gon focused on the words. He felt the grief well up inside him until he was

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sure it would break him, shatter him to pieces. Then, with every nerve of his body, he tried to let the pain go.

It wouldn't.

His head aching, Qui-Gon opened his eyes. It was always the same. He felt the incredible fullness of the pain, and then endless hollowness. The grief never actually left. It emptied him, but it would not leave him alone.

Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan was silent as the landspeeder traveled through the city. He could sense his Master's melancholy mood, and Lena was attentive only to driving. She navigated skillfully through the city, and Obi-Wan was yet again impressed by her composure. Less than half an hour ago they had nearly been killed. Yet she seemed to have wiped the memory away as easily as one wipes a crumb from a table.

Obi-Wan had assumed that they were going back to Lena's warehouse hideout. Instead she turned off toward her ransacked apartment after making sure they were not being followed. Obi-Wan considered inquiring about this, but thought better of it. He guessed that Lena was being silent for a reason.

Lena parked the landspeeder several hundred meters away from her building. They approached carefully, and found only one guard outside the turbolift. He was dozing off. Moving quickly past him, they entered the turbolift and were whisked to the top floor. Once inside her flat, Lena moved through room after room at a rapid pace, the Jedi at her heels.

Qui-Gon did not say anything, but followed with assurance. Obi-Wan felt a moment of frustration as he realized that his Master was not experiencing the same confusion he was. Even in

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his depressed state he seemed to know exactly what was going on.

It took a bit of effort for Obi-Wan to keep up with the two people in front of him. Lena led them out the secret exit they had used before, then down flight after flight of stairs. She did not slow her pace when they reached the alley. She simply hurried down several blocks, turning this way and that. Finally she hailed an air taxi and they all climbed inside.

Relieved not to be chasing after Lena and his Master, Obi-Wan sat back against the seat. "Were we being followed?" he asked. It was the logical reason for Lena's actions.

"Not that I know of," Lena said in a strange tone. She sounded almost giddy, as if the idea were amusing. "Zanita is really a wonderful woman. I'm lucky to know her."

Obi-Wan thought it was strange that Lena was speaking about her mother-in-law as if they were acquaintances and not family. But once again he kept quiet. What did he know about families, anyway?

Lena told the taxi driver to let them off several blocks from the warehouse. Once they were walking again, she relaxed a little. A moment later she reached out and touched Obi-Wan's arm.

"Sorry about that," she said, looking into his eyes. Obi-Wan tried to ignore the way he felt when she gazed at him.

"I couldn't talk in the taxi because of the sky drivers' collective," she explained. "They are Cobral supporters. And as for Zanita's vehicle, well, let's just say that it has plenty of added surveillance equipment that even Zanita might not know about."

Obi-Wan nodded, and Lena turned and kept walking. She spoke quietly, but loud enough for both Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon to hear.

"That statue falling was no accident. I'm sure the base is completely secure, no matter what Juno says. There are several traps on the property – the Cobrals call it security. They say they have to protect what's theirs."

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"Who do you think triggered it?" Qui-Gon asked, speaking for the first time since they'd left the Cobral property.

"I don't know," Lena replied. "The Cobrals have many allies – paid and unpaid. Although Juno is Zanita's servant, he works for Solan first. I'm sure he would be handsomely rewarded if he succeeded in killing me."

The group's mood was contemplative as they navigated the streets and arrived back at the warehouse.

Inside, Mica was pacing the living space. A medium-size package lay on a low table.

"This arrived while you were out," Mica said. She picked up the package and thrust it into her cousin's hands. She seemed slightly agitated.

Lena took the package and turned it over. It was covered in a thin gray wrapping material. There was nothing written on the material other than her name in block letters: LENA COBRAL.

Chapter Eight

"Rutin," Lena said, gazing down at the package. She ran her fingers over her name. "This is Rutin's handwriting," she explained, looking up at the Jedi. "I'd recognize it anywhere."

Qui-Gon looked down at the package, feeling quite certain that it was some sort of trap. Rutin was dead, was he not?

"I'd like to have a look at that," he said, stepping forward. "I want to make sure it is not dangerous before you open it."

Lena frowned. "Rutin would never put me in danger," she said adamantly.

Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow. From what he could gather, Rutin had put her in significant danger. But he saw no point in reminding Lena of that now.

"It could be a trap," Qui-Gon said plainly. Lena scowled slightly at Qui-Gon. Perhaps, Qui-Gon mused, she felt he was stealing her last gift from Rutin. But she gave Qui-Gon the package.

Closing his eyes, Qui-Gon held the package for several moments. When he opened them again, he returned the package to Lena.

"I do not sense anything immediately grave," he said. But he was not convinced that the package was from Rutin, or that it

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would help them gain evidence against the Cobral. He was not convinced of anything.

Lena set the box on the table and opened it with a small pocket blade before removing the wrapping. Then she began to empty its contents and set them on the table: a pair of black boots, a small vial of dirt... Lena's face fell as she looked over the contents of the box. "This doesn't make sense," she murmured.

"I think I'll go make us all something to eat," Mica said, excusing herself.

"Good idea, Mica," Lena said. "I'm starved."

Qui-Gon sat down next to Lena as soon as Mica left the room. He was unclear about the motives of both women, but felt he might be able to get some answers if he addressed them individually.

"Have you had any visitors to the warehouse?" he asked, not wasting any time.

Lena turned her attention away from the package and shook her head. "No, why?"

Instead of answering, Qui-Gon asked another question. "Have you received mysterious packages before today?"

Lena shook her head again. "No, of course not. I would have told you about them."

"I'm glad to hear that," Qui-Gon said, not entirely sure that he believed her.

The next question was perhaps the most important. "Is Mica the only one who knows about this place?" he asked quietly.

Lena looked up quickly. She was frowning.

"I think I'll go see if Mica needs any help with the food," Obi-Wan said abruptly.

Qui-Gon gave a brief nod to his Padawan, indicating that he thought it was a good idea. But he did not take his eyes off Lena's face.

Still frowning, Lena got to her feet. "Yes, Mica is the only other person besides you and Obi-Wan who knows about this apartment," she said flatly. She turned to face Qui-Gon again, her

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hands on her hips. "But do not question my cousin's loyalty. Mica and I grew up together. We are like sisters. And she is not in league with the Cobrals."

Lena crossed the room, then let out a sigh and came back to sit next to Qui-Gon. "I don't even like to discuss the Cobrals in front of Mica," she said slowly. "As a very young girl she witnessed the murder of her mother, and the memory is still excruciatingly painful."

"The Cobrals were responsible for her mother's death?" Qui-Gon asked, slightly surprised.

Lena nodded sadly. "They killed her in cold blood. Mica was only seven and she saw the whole thing. It was a huge loss, and perhaps an even bigger trauma. She has never gotten over it."

Qui-Gon was silent as this information sank in.

"Everything on Frego is so complicated," Lena said with a heavy sigh. "But I will try to explain. As I've said before, the Cobrals have many allies on Frego. For centuries Frego's government treated the citizens poorly – taxes were high and public services virtually nonexistent. Fregans worked hard only to have their money taken from them.

"The Cobral family changed all of that. While it is true that they made their fortune selling drugs and weapons and had a rough reputation, they used their power to force the government to provide the basic services people needed. They even lowered taxes and raised wages."

"Which made life for the people better," Qui-Gon said. He had visited planets with similar stories. A corrupt power ousted an unjust government, making positive changes. But the means through which those positive changes were made had its own kind of evil.

"Today the government acknowledges that the ways of the past were wrong, that they treated the people unfairly," Lena continued. "And many politicians resent having to operate under the Cobral thumb. They want to do right by their people. Or at

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least some of them do. Others appear to be noble, but are corrupt to the core."

"I see that the Cobral makes things quite complicated," Qui-Gon commented. "For everyone, it seems."

"There is no honesty, no safety," Lena stated. "We live by whims and not laws. That is why the violence has to stop. I know there is a better way, and I want Frego to have a chance for a new beginning-the beginning that Rutin and I did not have."

Tears welled in Lena's eyes, and for the first time Qui-Gon softened toward her. He understood just how she felt. He and Tahl had never had a new beginning, either.

Lena wiped her cheek. "There are some politicians who would also like to forge a new path for the future. And some people would like to support a new government. But many others feel a strong debt to the Cobrals for making life better."

Lena gazed solemnly at the package and the boots on the table. "It seems that no one can break free."

"But you trust your cousin completely?" Qui-Gon asked, getting back to his original line of questioning.

Lena looked Qui-Gon in the eye. "Without hesitation. As I told you, she is like my sister. Mica longs to avenge her mother and shed the corruption. Perhaps more than anyone."

Qui-Gon did not point out that Rutin and Solan were brothers. Instead he took a breath and let it out slowly.

"I'm afraid that Mica may have revealed your whereabouts," he stated. "Or else another party has discovered them on their own."

Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan entered the food galley and was only half surprised to see that the room was empty. Turning back down the hall, he spotted an old turbolift in one of the makeshift bedrooms. A second later he felt the building shudder. Mica was running away.

Obi-Wan leaped into the turbolift shaft, landing gracefully on top of the lift just as it came to a halt. Activating his lightsaber, he sliced a hole in the metal and jumped down a second time. But the lift was already empty. He heard the echo of Mica's receding footsteps as she raced toward the door.

Obi-Wan knew he should continue to follow her... doing so could provide information vital to the mission, and to Lena. What if Mica was out to hurt her cousin – what if her actions put Lena in even greater danger?

He couldn't risk that. He had to talk to Mica. Now.

It did not take Obi-Wan long to catch up to the girl. Grabbing her arm, he was struck by the anger he felt well up inside him. He was furious, he realized, because Mica was jeopardizing Lena's safety.

Obi-Wan calmed himself, intending to let the anger leave him before speaking. But as soon as he saw Mica's face the anger disappeared. The girl was clearly distraught.

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"Where are you going?" Obi-Wan asked, trying not to sound too stern.

Mica looked alarmed. "I... I was..." She blinked, her eyes glistening with tears. "I need to go somewhere," she finished in a whisper.

"Not before you tell me what's going on," Obi-Wan said. He spotted several large crates in a corner and led her over to them. Sitting her down on one, he found another for himself.

"It's time for you to tell the truth. If you truly care about Lena, you'll do so," he said.

Mica looked down at her feet. She didn't say anything for several minutes. Then she started to talk. "The Cobral is terrible," she began. "They do hideous, evil things. But I do not think that Lena – or anyone else – is capable of bringing them down. Rutin tried, and he is dead. Killed by his own family. My mother was killed by the Cobral as well."

A sob escaped Mica's throat and she wiped her eyes. "Of course I want to avenge her death. And I know that she is not the only one. Mine is not the only loss. I long to see those killers pay for their crimes. But if I go after them I would probably be killed, too. And so would Lena. They think nothing of taking life. It means nothing to them. Not even in their own family."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I cannot tell you that you are wrong," he said. "But the Cobral has Frego caught in an evil trap of violence and crime. Lena has a chance to destroy that trap – and those who made it – for good. She is willing to take that chance."

Mica nodded. "I know. Lena is a hero. She thinks nothing of her own life, only of Frego and its people. And I am nothing but a coward, guilty of thwarting her plan."

Obi-Wan nodded again, surprised that he was not filled with anger for a second time. He knew that Mica had been deceiving Lena but he was somehow relieved that Mica felt guilty about her actions. "How?" he asked simply.

"I wanted to stop the trial," Mica explained. "It was too dangerous. So I convinced Lena to wait until you arrived before

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proceeding with her plan. Then I broke into her apartment and erased the files. I figured that if the evidence was gone, Lena would have to give up. And if she gave up, the Cobral would leave her alone. She would be safe. Of course, I did not expect to find the hired thugs at her apartment."

"Thugs?" Obi-Wan repeated.

Mica nodded. "They were heavily armed and ransacking the place. At the time I thought they were just street people, thieves after the jewelry and precious metals. Lena and Rutin had a lot of beautiful possessions."

She paused for a moment before going on. "But then I realized that they must have been searching for something."

"Did you see what they looked like?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No," Mica said. "They fled as soon as they heard me coming. They left the bedroom alone. I only caught a glimpse of their backs as they climbed over the balcony. I did not try to get a better look because I didn't want them to see me. I only know that there were two of them – both men. One was quite tall and lanky. The other short and bald."

"Not much to go on," Obi-Wan mused.

"I'm sure they were hired by the Cobral," Mica said.

Obi-Wan felt better about Mica now that she had confided in him. But there was still one question that was bothering him. "I understand why you wanted to erase the computer files, but why did you leave that threatening message on the screen?"

Mica looked up, surprised. "What message?" she asked. "I didn't send any message." She paused for a moment. Then, as if reading Obi-Wan's mind, she said, "And I didn't tell anyone where Lena was hiding, either."

Chapter Ten

Lena looked at Qui-Gon in disbelief. Qui-Gon could tell she did not think Mica would reveal her whereabouts, but the package on the table meant it was likely that someone had. The strange contents were not dangerous, but the knowledge of Lena's whereabouts was – especially in the wrong hands.

"I must speak to Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon excused himself.

Walking slowly toward the kitchen, Qui-Gon felt exhausted. This routine mission was turning out to be more difficult than he'd imagined. He felt a strong sense of deception, but something about it continued to elude him. He could not tell who was being deceived, or by whom. And he did not understand why Lena so fiercely protected her cousin. She had obviously learned – the hard way – that family lines do not protect you from being double-crossed. Or killed.

The food galley was empty. Following his instincts, Qui-Gon started down the stairs. Halfway to the ground level, Qui-Gon met Obi-Wan and a sullen Mica coming up the stairwell.

"The evidence is gone," Obi-Wan blurted. "Mica erased it."

"Erased or stole?" Qui-Gon asked, looking directly at Mica.

"Erased!" Mica spat back defiantly. "I do not profit by the misfortune of others, especially Lena." Her voice softened when she spoke of her cousin. "I only wanted to protect her. To make

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all of this go away." Mica hung her head and shuffled her feet before the Jedi led her back up the stairs. She obviously knew it was time to tell Lena what she had done.

Although she was clearly ashamed of her actions, Qui-Gon felt that her conscience was clear. She was not deceiving them. He felt relief in knowing that *somebody* wasn't.

"Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon stopped his Padawan on the landing, allowing Mica to go farther ahead. "We must proceed with caution. All is not as it seems with our witness. On this planet, lies come easier than the truth, and at a lower cost."

As Obi-Wan raised his eyes to meet his Master's, Qui-Gon saw tiny flames of anger burn inside them, then flicker out.

"Lena is a noble woman," Obi-Wan said evenly. "She is struggling to do what is right. Your doubts will not help her."

Qui-Gon could not help but smile faintly. Obi-Wan thought Qui-Gon was insulting Lena, and he was upset – ready to defend her. It confirmed what Qui-Gon had suspected, that Obi-Wan was infatuated with Lena. He should have pointed it out sooner, to try and warn the boy. Most likely he would end up getting badly hurt.

"You are infatuated, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "Be careful not to let yourself be guided by your attraction."

"I am – " Obi-Wan shook his head and struggled to keep his voice under control. "It is not infatuation. Lena's motives are good."

"The motives she has told us are good, but there may be others. Think of what she is giving up. She will probably never live again in the manner to which she was accustomed. She lost her footing with the Cobral when Rutin was killed and is in danger of being an outcast. Not just from the family, but from all of Frego. Don't you think it is possible that she is trying to get evidence in order to have something to bargain with?"

Obi-Wan made no gesture to show that he understood. "There is another day," he said softly. "Then we shall see." He turned to walk up the stairs.

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Qui-Gon entered Lena's quarters behind his apprentice. Mica stood over the table staring at an empty box. The contents of the package were gone.

"I told her I erased the evidence," Mica said tearfully. "But I don't think she even heard me."

"Where is Lena now?" Qui-Gon asked. Obi-Wan was already headed for the stairs.

"I don't know," Mica sobbed, sinking into a low couch. "She didn't say anything to me. She just took what was in the box and left."

Chapter Eleven

"Obi-Wan, wait," his Master commanded. Obi-Wan did not want to listen. Not now. Not while Lena was alone and in danger. But he slid to a stop at the top of the stairs.

"We'll have a better chance of finding her if we have some idea where she might have gone," Qui-Gon said. He sat down next to Mica. "Where do *you* think she went?" he asked evenly.

Obi-Wan remained at the top of the stairs. He knew his impatience had little to do with finding Lena. He was impatient with his Master, and a bit confused. He used to know Qui-Gon so well that at times it felt like they shared one mind. They both knew how the other would react to a situation, what his thoughts and actions would be. But this was no longer the case.

Just when Obi-Wan believed that Qui-Gon was beyond caring about the mission, he had taken charge. If Qui-Gon hadn't stopped Obi-Wan, he would be with Lena now, and sure of her safety. Leaning against the stair railing, Obi-Wan let out an exasperated sigh. There was no point in questioning Mica.

"Let's go, then," Qui-Gon said. He stood and strode toward the stairs in fluid movement. Mica, eyes still red from crying, hurried in front of him.

Obi-Wan followed. He had been too lost in his own thoughts to hear where they were headed. Breathing deeply, he let go of

his frustration and focused his energy on the matter at hand. Qui-Gon had no right to doubt Lena. He had been too distracted until now to even notice who she was, her real nature. But if Qui-Gon was – at least for the moment – concentrating on the mission, Obi-Wan could too.

Mica was not as concerned with being seen this time as she led the Jedi through the streets of Rian. They left the warehouses and alleys and hurried into the center of the city. Over Qui-Gon's head Obi-Wan saw a gleaming transparent structure, like an enormous serpent that snaked its way overhead, between the towering buildings.

Inside the structure Obi-Wan saw green leaves and moving forms. Water beaded on the inside of the rounded transparisteel walls, making it look like a vast, multistoried greenhouse. Although Obi-Wan could not see where it began or where it ended, the structure appeared to wind through the city for several kilometers.

"There," an out-of-breath Mica said, pointing toward a door to the structure. "I think she might be in the Tubal Park."

"I was hoping for something a bit smaller," Qui-Gon said. Obi-Wan could not tell if he was mildly amused or truly frustrated.

Obi-Wan caught up to Mica as they approached the entrance. "Why would she come here?" he asked.

"This park means a lot to Lena. She used to come here with Rutin, and she always comes here to think," Mica answered. "Or at least she used to."

The giant oval doors opened and the three stepped inside. As the doors closed behind them Obi-Wan felt as if he'd stepped off a ship onto another planet. Inside the air was moist. The noise of the city was gone, replaced by the echoing sound of running water and children's voices.

Looking up, Obi-Wan could only barely make out the seams in the roof beyond the tops of the towering trees. Paths crisscrossed one another, leading toward brightly blooming

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plants or meandering beside creeks and trickling waterfalls. People strolled over the bridges and ducked through the tunnels that wove under and around the dense flora. There were small animals winging overhead, and even smaller amphibians flopping in the pools.

Obi-Wan could see why Lena would come here. It reminded him of the Room of a Thousand Fountains at the Jedi Temple. That, too, was a sanctuary and a great place to go to think.

"Do you know her favorite spot?" Qui-Gon asked.

Mica shook her head sadly. "I never came here with her. She only came alone, or with Rutin. She could be anywhere."

"Then I suggest we split up," Qui-Gon said to Obi-Wan. "Mica can come with me."

Obi-Wan nodded and headed off to his left. It would be a relief to be away from Qui-Gon for a while. He could use some time alone to think.

As soon as he had walked away from his Master, Obi-Wan's mind filled with thoughts of Lena. All around him people were gathered in small groups. They ate, played, and leaned back on the grass to stare up at the leaves. Yet Obi-Wan was only aware of them enough to know that they were not Lena.

Could it really be infatuation? Obi-Wan wondered. After taking several deep breaths and letting go of his anger and frustration, Obi-Wan could not deny it. As usual, Qui-Gon was right. He was falling for Lena. But it was not just her beauty. No, it was more than that.

It was her strength – the strength she drew from her vulnerability- that had enamored him. Lena was a grieving young widow. The husband she had loved was only recently lost. But instead of hiding in the hole that he'd left, she pulled new purpose from it. She was not drowning in it, refusing to speak of the loss. Not like Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan's thoughts drifted back to his Master. He shook his head as he climbed a steep bridge arching over a waterfall. Perhaps the bond between them was not as damaged as Obi-

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Wan imagined. No matter how he tried, Obi-Wan could not deny that Qui-Gon correctly recognized Obi-Wan's feelings for Lena, and before he did.

How can he be so clear about the emotions of others when he cannot seem to untangle his own? Obi-Wan wondered.

"With time," Master Yoda would say. *"With time all are healed."*

Obi-Wan felt new energy flood through him as he relaxed and let go of everything that had been bothering him. He had been in danger of letting his emotions blind him. Now he felt more sure.

Still, Obi-Wan did not believe his Master had been right about *everything*. Walking more quickly and scanning the park for Lena, Obi-Wan realized his resolve to help her was stronger than ever. Whether or not his judgment had been clouded by affection, he knew that Lena was on the side of rightness.

For the first time in hours, Obi-Wan felt clear. And he was more certain than ever that Lena was doing the right thing. She was fighting for peace and justice, and not just for herself. For her entire planet. As a Jedi it was his duty to help.

As these thoughts formed in his mind, a new one floated over them like a dark cloud: They were running out of time.

Chapter Twelve

Qui-Gon pulled his comlink from his utility belt. He was about to activate it and summon Obi-Wan when his Padawan appeared, walking toward him on one of the paths.

"There he is," said Mica a moment later. She craned her neck to see what Qui-Gon already knew. Lena wasn't with him, either. The three of them had scoured most of the enormous park, but Lena was nowhere to be found.

Mica and the Jedi left the park and walked back to the deserted warehouse in silence. Qui-Gon tried to stretch out with his feelings, to get a sense of whether or not Lena was in danger, or even alive. But he felt nothing.

The dim evening light made the hideout look less welcoming than it had early that morning. Qui-Gon strode into the room ahead of the others, and immediately saw a figure sitting on the couch in the darkness.

In a flash, he activated his lightsaber. Its green blade cast an eerie light over the room, illuminating the sparks in Lena's eyes. Qui-Gon quickly switched off the blade just as Obi-Wan and Mica came into the room.

"Lena," Mica cried when she saw her cousin. She hurried forward and sank to her knees in front of the couch. "Lena, we were so worried. Where were you?"

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"I'm sorry I ran off," Lena said, looking from one person to the next. "I didn't want to worry you, but I had to be sure that the package was from Rutin. I had to know...." Lena trailed off.

Mica rose to turn on the light. Back on the table, next to the wrappings, were the contents of the package: the pair of waterproof boots, the small light, the beam drill, and the vial of dirt.

The objects made no sense to Qui-Gon. What did Lena have to know? And where had she been? Qui-Gon felt betrayed. She was not telling them the whole truth.

Although Lena appeared to be upset, Qui-Gon did not wait for her to calm down. "Where have you been?" he demanded.

Lena looked up, surprised by the stern tone of the Jedi's voice. "Wandering," she replied. "I – I needed to be alone."

Qui-Gon was not satisfied. "Alone? Or just away from us?"

Lena's lip trembled and Qui-Gon noticed Obi-Wan was staring at him. He softened his tone slightly, but pressed on. "Why did you take the contents of the package with you?"

"That package is from Rutin," Lena said after a moment, struggling to control her voice. "He sent it to me before he..." She fought again for composure. "But how did he know he was going to die? And why didn't he tell me?"

Lena lost the struggle to suppress her frustrated grief and dropped her head into her hands. "He's trying to give me a message," she said after a moment, struggling to control her voice. "But I can't figure it out! It's as though he's speaking to me, and I can't hear him." Lena lost the struggle.... "He really is gone forever."

Mica and Obi-Wan rushed to join her on the couch, anxious to offer support. Qui-Gon stumbled back until he was sitting, facing the other three. Lena looked so much smaller than she had before. Less capable of deception, somehow.

Qui-Gon felt himself diminish as Lena's waves of grief washed into him, adding to the sea of sadness that never stopped pounding in his heart. Her words touched him deeply, and he

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had no more doubts about her sincerity. He, too, knew how the fact of a loved one's absence could strike with as savage a blow as the first realization. He knew that moment when the future ahead seemed empty and impossible to bear.

"The loved ones we have lost are always with us," Qui-Gon said. He was surprised to hear himself speaking, and surprised by his words. But they rendered comfort. Suddenly, it did feel as if Tahl were nearby, and the storm inside of him quieted a little.

There was a moment of thoughtful silence in the room. Obi-Wan gazed at his Master, his eyes full of compassion. And for the first time Qui-Gon did not feel the need to look away.

Lena's grief seemed to lift, and she looked at the Jedi Master gratefully. "It's true," she said, nodding. "Rutin is looking after me even now. He must have sent this package some time ago and arranged to have it delivered today. I'm sure it is meant to help me find evidence. He must have known that any information on the computer would be a target. He knew I would need something more."

Qui-Gon noticed that Mica paled as Lena spoke of the computer. He wondered if she was embarrassed that her plan hadn't worked, or frightened by the possibility that more evidence existed.

The young widow took no notice of her cousin. Her tears had stopped and the familiar strength was returning. Lena gathered the boots from the table and held them in her lap. "I haven't figured out the clue yet, but I will," she said firmly.

"Just please don't rush off like that again," Mica told her. "You scared me to death. We searched the park for hours."

Lena frowned. "The park..." she murmured.

Obi-Wan stared at the strange items on the table, then suddenly spoke. "Rutin had the package delivered to you here. So, he must have known about the hideout."

"Of course," Lena said. "Rutin was the one who secured this place. He was planning to hide here himself while he waited to be smuggled off the planet."

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Suddenly, Lena leaped to her feet, knocking the boots aside. "I almost forgot," she cried, pulling a datapad from her pocket. "While I was out I went by my apartment to see if I'd received a message from Zanita. She sent this."

Chapter Thirteen

The sky outside the warehouse had darkened to a milky gray. Qui-Gon peered around the portal screens that masked the people inside from the streets below. It was getting late and the alleys were deserted.

"Meeting with Zanita is an unnecessary risk," Qui-Gon stated as he left the portal and paced the floor. He suddenly felt that leaving the planet as soon as possible was the best course of action. "We have the clues from Rutin, and should work with that. We do not need to place you or your mother-in-law in further danger."

"She's taking a risk because I asked her to," Lena argued. "I can't just let her wait in vain."

With a frown, Qui-Gon looked at the message on the datapad again.

TRANSPORT LOADING STATION, DOCK 12
10 P.M. TONIGHT
ALONE
FOR RUTIN

"I never should have gotten Zanita involved," Lena lamented. "But it is too late to change that now. If I can go alone, I can talk to her and convince her that I've changed my mind. I'll tell her

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I'm scared and have decided to leave the planet. Then we will all be safer."

Qui-Gon had to admit that it was not a bad plan. It would buy them some time and could even help them get off planet easier. He nodded his assent.

"But we won't let you go alone," Obi-Wan said. Mica looked relieved to hear this.

"Of course not," Qui-Gon echoed. "It is not safe."

"It is the only way I can convince Zanita," Lena argued. "She saw you at the estate. Surely she knows you are here representing the Galactic Republic. I will not be able to convince her I've changed my mind if she sees I am accompanied by Jedi!"

"We are here for your protection," Qui-Gon said firmly. *And to make sure you are what you say you are.* Learning that Lena had returned to her apartment when she was alone had once again aroused Qui-Gon's suspicions. She could have done any number of things while she was there. Though he accepted the sincerity of her grief, he would not lose sight of the fact that there could be pressures on her that he knew nothing about.

"I'm afraid you're stuck with us until we all arrive safely back on Coruscant." Obi-Wan smiled. "We will remain hidden, but we will not allow you to go alone."

Lena returned Obi-Wan's smile. "All right," she said. "We'd better hurry so we are first to arrive. It's not very far."

"Be careful," Mica said, embracing her cousin. "I'll be here if you need me. I'll *always* be here if you need me."

Lena touched her cousin's cheek. "I'll be right back!" she promised.

Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Lena left the warehouse and made their way through the dark streets, lit only by the occasional light of the planet's two moons. Now that daylight had faded, Frego seemed a less inviting place. It was as though the darkness brought out the lies and deceit that pervaded the planet.

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As the three neared the station, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan fell back into the shadows. Lena insisted on walking boldly in the middle of the street, under the glowing lights.

"She should be more careful," Obi-Wan muttered.

"No, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "She should not appear as if she has anything to hide. Besides, her presence will help to diminish ours."

Dock 12 was eerily silent. Low buildings rimmed a giant landing pad where huge transport ships were loaded with goods. The edges of the pad were almost completely dark.

Obi-Wan motioned to his Master and both Jedi leaped noiselessly onto a low rooftop. After making his way to the edge, Qui-Gon lay down next to Obi-Wan and the two watched Lena walk slowly into the orange square of light in the center of the landing pad. From their perch the Jedi could see everything, and they could be at Lena's side in a moment.

Although Lena's was the only shape Qui-Gon could make out in the darkness, he sensed they were not alone. He had felt another presence almost from the moment they had left the hideout, but now the feeling was stronger, more threatening.

From the opposite side of the pad, Zanita stepped into view. Lena moved with both arms out to greet her mother-in-law.

But Zanita did not raise her arms or offer any greeting. After taking one more lurching step forward, the reason became clear.

Zanita's mouth was covered with a gag, and behind her, holding her bound arms firmly pressed against her back, was her oldest son, Solan Cobral.

Chapter Fourteen

Obi-Wan leaped to his feet as three more figures emerged behind Solan and Zanita. But Qui-Gon pulled him back down.

Obi-Wan wrestled his arm free of his Master. He had to protect Lena. She was unarmed facing two droids, Solan Cobral, and his brother, Bard. The young widow was no match for men evil enough to hold their own mother captive, or order the death of their own brother.

"Not yet," Qui-Gon said softly. "I'd like to see what these men have in mind."

Obi-Wan sank to his knees. He would wait, for now. But if anyone made a move toward Lena, not even Qui-Gon would be able to stop him.

In the orange light of the landing pad Lena took a few steps back.

"Solan," she said. Her voice sounded strange to Obi-Wan, almost full of guilt. He wondered if she felt responsible for what was happening to Zanita.

"You were supposed to come alone," the crime boss boomed.

"I did," Lena replied without flinching.

Nervous that they had been spotted, Obi-Wan felt for his lightsaber. He tried to rise but Qui-Gon's hand on his shoulder pushed him back to his knees.

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"Not us," Qui-Gon whispered.

"Don't hurt her," a voice cried in the darkness below. "She didn't know I was coming." Obi-Wan recognized the voice immediately. It was Mica. A moment later she was standing beside her cousin. Obi-Wan had not known she was there.

"Please, don't hurt Lena. She would never turn against the Cobral. She's only been trying to cover for me. I am the one you want. I am the one who knows how you operate. I am the one who wanted to testify against you."

"Mica, no. Be quiet," Lena whispered in an attempt to stop her cousin's outburst.

"Don't listen to her," Lena told the Cobrals. "She is protecting me. She doesn't know that I came tonight to tell Zanita I've changed my mind. I was a fool to think I could go against the Cobral. Solan, please hear me. You and Bard and Zanita are all I have left of my precious husband, Rutin. I realize that I need to hold on to the family I have, now more than ever. Where will I be if I drive you away? No matter what has happened in the past, we will always be family. And family is more important to me than anything."

"How wise," Solan replied, chuckling. He shoved Zanita toward Bard, who caught her with one hand. He held a blaster in the other.

"I'm touched that you still want to be a part of the family," he continued, taking a step closer. "And I'm grateful that you came together," he continued, walking closer still. "It will make cleaning up the mess you've made that much easier."

Solan dived toward Lena and Mica as the two droids closed in on either side.

Up on the roof, Obi-Wan knew it was time. Qui-Gon was at his side as he leaped off the roof and sprinted toward the helpless cousins.

Mica was caught in Solan's grasp, but Lena pulled away just in time. She turned to run and found herself face-to-face with a lanky but potentially lethal droid.

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The one-eyed droid's arms shot out from its sides and began to wrap themselves around her. Lena ducked at the same moment Obi-Wan's lightsaber blade severed one arm, and with a mighty backswing separated the droid's head from its body.

Obi-Wan pushed Lena behind him and rushed to meet the other droid.

Beside him, Qui-Gon deflected a bolt from Bard's blaster, sending it toward Solan's feet. Solan struggled to hold on to Mica and train his blaster on the Jedi. He did not notice Lena sneaking up behind him.

Lena grabbed Solan's blaster. Mica whipped her body back and forth, delivering a sharp blow with her elbow to Solan's jaw. He lost his grip on both Mica and the weapon.

The second droid fired rapid bolts at Obi-Wan, who deflected them easily. Though the bolts turned and rained back on the droid, it did not show any damage. It continued to spray the pad with fire while rapidly extending a long arm to grab Mica.

Qui-Gon dispatched the arm with an elegant sweep of his lightsaber and stepped forward to finish the job. A slashing blow to the machine's midsection finally brought the droid down.

While Qui-Gon took care of the droid, Obi-Wan quickly surveyed the scene. Behind him Mica appeared to be in shock. She lay on the ground, staring into the darkness. Lena bravely held her blaster on Solan.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan leaped high in the air over Lena's head. He knew what was going to happen before it happened, but still was not in time to deflect the blast. From his spot deep in the shadows, still holding the bound-and gagged Zanita, Bard fired his blaster straight at Lena.

Mica dived Lena screamed. And the bolt found flesh.

Chapter Fifteen

While Obi-Wan hurried toward the two women, Qui-Gon hit the ground running. He rushed toward Bard and his hostage, but could not see where they had gone in the darkness. He could merely hear the muffled sounds of the footsteps fleeing ahead of him.

Qui-Gon raced behind a building in time to see Solan climb into a repulsorlift vehicle. Bard shoved his mother in behind his brother, and the engine gunned.

Qui-Gon stopped short, his breath catching in his throat. The Cobrals had a vehicle waiting. It was useless to pursue them on foot. Besides, Qui-Gon was anxious to return to the dock. He had a terrible feeling about what he would find there.

Qui-Gon rounded the corner of the building. In the orange square of light he saw two figures kneeling. A third figure lay in his Padawan's arms. There was no life emanating from the body.

Mica was dead.

Lena threw herself onto her cousin's body, sobbing. "No, Mica," she cried, begging. "Not you. Don't leave me."

Qui-Gon stared at the scene before him, frozen. His mind flashed back to Tahl's last words to him. A horrible ache clenched his chest.

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"Wherever I am headed, I will wait for you, Qui-Gon," she had said. "I've always been a solitary traveler"

"Not anymore," Qui-Gon had teased. "We will go on together. You promised, and you can't back out now. I'll never let you forget it."

Tahl had smiled slightly, and the effort drained her. Qui-Gon had known then that she was in grave danger. That she was going to die. He'd called on the Force, on the Jedi, on his great love for her. Nothing had been able to save the woman he loved.

Qui-Gon had rested his forehead against Tahl's. Their breath mingled. "Let my last moment be this one," she had said.

And it was.

"Master," Obi-Wan said quietly, and Qui-Gon was suddenly brought back to the moment. Lena was crumpled over Mica in front of him, wallowing in her pain. There was no trace of the strong, resolved woman Qui-Gon had met when he arrived on Frego. He did not see the woman who he thought might be deceiving them. He only saw a woman bent over a dead body, unable to cope with her agony.

He knew exactly how that felt. But he had survived, had gone on. And he believed that Lena could as well.

Qui-Gon bent down next to Lena. "I am so sorry," he said softly. "I know I cannot share your pain. But I do understand it."

With a shudder, Lena let go of Mica's body. "I would like to wrap the body," she said, wiping her eyes. "It is the custom here."

Obi-Wan found an old tarp outside a nearby ship, and Lena showed the Jedi the traditional way to enclose the body in it.

"Mica always looked out for me," Lena said as she lay the wrapped body gently on the ground. "She always tried to guide me in the right direction."

The three stood quietly together for a moment, silently saying good-bye. Then they left Mica lying in the pool of orange light.

"The park," Lena said as they slowly moved away from the body. "Mica said you'd searched it for hours."

"We did," Obi-Wan confirmed.

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Lena's shoulders straightened and her eyes cleared. "I know what Rutin was trying to tell me," she said with sudden certainty. "We have to get to the park immediately."

Qui-Gon was amazed at Lena's ability to change her focus back to finding the necessary evidence. Her face was full of deep sadness, but she carried herself upright as she led them to the Tubal Park.

Once inside, Lena headed directly for a spot at the rear of the park. It was still dark, but the sky had completely cleared and the planet's two moons shone in the night sky. Their silver light partly lit the paths, bridges, and brooks.

Qui-Gon continuously scanned the area around them. He did not sense anything dangerous – the park seemed serene and peaceful, just as it had during the day. But it would have been foolish to let his guard down. Obi- Wan stood a distance away, alert for any trespass.

Suddenly, Lena stopped short next to a small stand of lush tropical trees. A stream gurgled over smooth rocks and into a pool of clear water.

With a sigh, Lena sat down. "This was our special place," she said. "I remember the first time Rutin brought me here four years ago. We were not even married yet. But we had so many plans, so many dreams." Her eyes shone with happiness for a brief moment. But before long, tears were welling in them and she broke down, sobbing.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "Sometimes it is more than I can bear. I find myself wishing that it was I who had been killed, not him. I would have gladly given my life to save his."

Qui-Gon nodded. "I, too, have wished I could have given my life to save another, one whom I had loved. But now I know that it is often harder to be the one left behind. I would not have wanted her to feel such loneliness, to go through the pain I have gone through." He touched Lena's arm briefly. "Rutin left these things for you because he knew his death was possible, and he trusted that you would carry on."

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Qui-Gon looked into Lena's eyes, and knew that his words were getting through to her. Surprisingly, he felt a lightening in his own chest as well. His grief for Tahl was still excruciating, but he suddenly knew that there would come a time when it would be possible to bear. And in his heart he was certain that Tahl would want him to carry on, too. She would have hated the way he had chosen to mourn her, he realized suddenly. He had allowed his grief to remove him from everyone who had tried to help him. Because the weight of his sorrow was so terrible, he could not lift his head to see that others mourned her, too. Obi-Wan. Yoda. Bant. Clee Rhava. The list was long.

Her face rose in his mind. He could see the ironic twist to her lips.

"*Now* who's blind?" she said.

Her voice was so real to him. How he wished he could answer....

"Thank you, Qui-Gon," Lena said softly, breaking his reverie. "As difficult as it is to live without Rutin, I know that you are right."

Qui-Gon briefly squeezed Lena's hand. He noticed that his Padawan's face wore a look of confused frustration, and felt he had some explaining to do. But now was not the time to discuss it. They had to find the evidence and leave the planet.

"Do you have any ideas about what the clues from the package mean?" Qui-Gon asked.

Lena got to her feet and began to look under rocks and thick green leaves. "I'm sure this is the spot," she explained. "But the clues don't make any sense to me. Why would I need a drill? Or a pair of boots?"

The three searched the area, finding nothing but grass, water, rocks, and plants.

"There's nothing here," Obi-Wan finally said, sounding exasperated. "It's just like any other lovely spot in the woods."

Hearing his words, Lena suddenly looked up. "But it isn't, of course," she said. "It's all manufactured. Human made." She

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began to look at the ground in a new way. She stepped across a patch of fake ground covered with moss. Getting to her knees, she peeled it back.

Underneath was a large, locked panel.

Lena picked up the beam drill and forced the panel open. Lifting it aside, she found a short tunnel descending down.

Excited, Lena lowered herself into the tunnel. A moment later Qui-Gon heard a loud splash.

"Well, I know what the boots were for," she called up. "I'm up to my ankles in water. But at least it's not sewage!"

Qui-Gon handed Lena the boots. They were big, and Lena pulled them on over her shoes. Then she turned on the flashlight and splashed around. She was inside a small pump room.

"Do you need help?" Obi-Wan called down.

There was some more splashing, but no response. Then several moments of complete silence.

Qui-Gon and his Padawan exchanged glances. Qui-Gon was just about to lower himself into the tunnel when they heard a gleeful shout.

"I found it!" Lena exclaimed.

A moment later she emerged with a second small package in a waterproof sheathing.

Qui-Gon hoped it was the evidence they needed.

Chapter Sixteen

The three wasted no time getting back to the warehouse. They had been at the park for a couple of hours, and it was now very early morning.

Obi-Wan was anxious to get to the makeshift apartment and open the package. He was also exhausted, and hoped they would be able to rest for a few hours before planning their next move. But then his Master was never one to rest. There had been many times when Obi-Wan was certain that the older Jedi simply did not need sleep.

Once safely inside the warehouse, Lena ripped open the package. Inside was a datapad, well wrapped and protected from water or shaking. Lena switched the tiny machine on and they all waited while it hummed to life.

The next few moments seemed to go on for hours. Her hands a bit shaky, Lena put the data-pad on a low table and sat down on the sofa. The datapad beeped.

Lena pressed a series of buttons on the side of the machine, and information began to flash across the screen. Information about illegal land negotiations, bribery, government extortion, contracts for murders... the list of crimes went on and on.

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"Say good-bye to power, Solan," she whispered. Lena looked up at the Jedi, smiling. "This will put the Cobral behind bars for a long, long time," she said.

Obi-Wan sighed in relief. Soon this mission would be over. Lena would be safe, and Frego would be free.

Qui-Gon did not waste any time in contacting Senator Crote on Coruscant. He explained that they had the evidence they needed, and they would be traveling with it first thing in the morning.

"Wonderful," the senator replied. "Take the *Degarian II*. It is fast and available. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

With nothing more to do, Lena and the Jedi settled down for a few hours' rest. But while Lena slept in the room next door and his Master dozed nearby, Obi-Wan found that, exhausted as he was, sleep evaded him. He kept remembering the conversation he'd overheard between his Master and Lena in the park. Qui-Gon had never spoken so frankly about his grief to anyone. Why did he choose to confide in a woman he barely trusted, and not in his own Padawan?

Obi-Wan knew that Tahl's death was incredibly hard for Qui-Gon. He knew now that his Master was in love with her. But while Tahl was alive Obi-Wan had not fully recognized that their love existed. When did it blossom? Qui-Gon and Tahl barely had any time together that he knew about.

As Obi-Wan lay in the darkness, guilt washed over him. He knew it was not right for him to be upset with his Master. Who he chose to confide in was his decision. And if it was not Obi-Wan, so be it.

Rolling over, Obi-Wan remembered his Master's words to Lena. He remembered the look in Qui-Gon's eyes. And more than anything, he wished he could find a way to ease his Master's pain.

At last the fatigue of the mission overcame Obi-Wan and he began to drift into sleep. But just as his senses were falling into a more relaxed state, he heard movement in Lena's room.

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Obi-Wan sat up, wondering for half a moment if Lena was trying to escape without them – if his Master had been right to question her motives all along. She'd spoken convincingly to Solan, perhaps she really did want to make amends with the Cobral. Then Obi-Wan heard a second set of footsteps and a struggle. Someone was attacking Lena!

Checking to make sure his lightsaber was safely at his side, Obi-Wan broke into Lena's room. Lena sat on a chair, bound and gagged. A figure wearing a hooded burgundy tunic stood over her.

Launching himself into the air, Obi-Wan somersaulted over the two of them, pulling back the figure's hood. He expected to find the face of a Cobral, but did not recognize the stranger, whose face contorted into a tangle of rage as he drew a blaster.

Obi-Wan was ready with his lightsaber, but the intruder quickly shoved something into his pocket and made for the transparisteel portal. He was about to disappear when Qui-Gon burst into the room and knocked the man into the wall with a Force wave. The intruder slid to the floor and was still.

Obi-Wan quickly untied Lena. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Lena nodded. "Another thug working for the Cobral," she said, cracking a half smile. "I'm almost getting used to them."

"Good timing, Master," Obi-Wan said wryly as he helped Lena to her feet.

"Thank you," Qui-Gon replied as he bent over the man. "He's going to wake up with quite a headache, I'm afraid."

Qui-Gon had not cracked a joke in weeks, and it was music to Obi-Wan's ears.

Qui-Gon searched the man's pockets and quickly retrieved Rutin's datapad. He retrieved something else, Obi-Wan saw, but concealed it in his hand.

Qui-Gon stood up and faced Lena and Obi-Wan. His face was grave with concern.

"There's been a change in plans. We must leave Frego as soon as possible," he said.

Chapter Seventeen

Lena, Qui-Gon, and Obi-Wan were silent as they once again made their way through the darkened streets of Rian. It was almost dawn, and a pale yellow light was beginning to overtake the sky. Qui-Gon was anxious for the mission to be over. But as he strode purposefully ahead, he could not shake the feeling that they were far from the end.

When they arrived at one of the city's many landing platforms, Obi-Wan headed straight for the *Degarian II*. He was practically boarding the ship before Qui-Gon was able to catch up to him. Lena was at his heels.

"No, Padawan," Qui-Gon said quietly, pulling him aside. "We will not be taking this ship." Qui-Gon gestured with his head toward a lone vehicle in the corner of the launch bay. "I believe that this one will better serve our purposes."

Obi-Wan looked momentarily confused, then he nodded. He gently steered Lena away from the *Degarian II* and guided her to a shadowy area of the platform.

Qui-Gon approached the pilot of the smaller ship. "We're looking for passage to Coruscant," he explained in a low voice. "We'd like to leave as soon as possible."

The pilot stopped what he was doing and stood to his full height, which was considerable. He did not say anything at first,

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but simply looked Qui-Gon in the eye. Qui-Gon returned his gaze without flinching. He felt confident that this man was not in league with the Cobral. Flying with him would be relatively safe.

"I can fly you to Coruscant," the pilot finally said. He named his fee, which seemed a fair price.

Qui-Gon agreed. "We have some business to attend to, but will return shortly," he said. The pilot nodded. "I will be ready."

Qui-Gon turned and headed back to Obi-Wan and Lena. Now he only had to make it appear as if they were leaving the planet on the *Degarian II*, as planned.

"Time to board," he said in a normal voice as he walked up the boarding ramp. Then he quietly added to Obi-Wan, "Let me do the talking."

The *Degarian II* was a large and comfortable ship, with a diplomatic lounge and roomy sleeping quarters for its passengers. The Jedi and Lena were greeted by a droid host as soon as they got on board.

Qui-Gon was surprised to see that the droid was identical to those he and Obi-Wan had cut down earlier in the evening, but greeted the droid as if he were expecting him. After chatting for a few brief moments and accepting a message of welcome from Senator Crote, Qui-Gon declared that they were all very tired and would like to retire to their resting quarters.

"That will be fine," the droid replied. "I can show you the way." It led them down a long hall to a trio of spacious rooms.

"Thank you," Qui-Gon said. "Please be sure to wake us before we arrive."

The droid nodded. "Of course. We have clearance to leave in twenty minutes." He stood for a moment, as if waiting to make sure that each of them went into a room. Lena yawned and said good night, then disappeared through a doorway. Obi-Wan did the same, and Qui-Gon followed.

Qui-Gon waited for a good fifteen minutes before knocking on Lena's door.

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"We're getting off early," Qui-Gon said as Obi-Wan appeared behind him.

Lena looked confused. "Do you think it is safe?" she asked.

"Safer than staying on board," Obi-Wan replied with a grimace.

Qui-Gon started down the hall and the others followed closely behind. They escaped through a small hatch at the back of the ship just as the craft's engines hummed to life. They were boarding the other ship by the time the *Degarian II* disappeared into the atmosphere above them.

As soon as everyone was safely on board, Qui-Gon explained what had just transpired. "I'm afraid Senator Crote is not what he appears to be." He pulled a travel order bearing the official Fregan senatorial seal from his pocket. It also bore Senator Crote's signature. "I found this on the thug who tried to steal Rutin's evidence."

Lena's eyes widened. "The senator?" she exclaimed. "I felt certain he was above this – that he was not part of the corruption."

"I have felt certain of many things that have not been so," Qui-Gon replied. "There are many hidden truths in a galaxy such as ours."

Lena sat back and rubbed her eyes. She was clearly overwhelmed. It seemed there was no end to the Cobral web of lies.

"Obviously I did not think it worth the risk to fly on the *Degarian II*," Qui-Gon continued. He flashed a brief smile. "I think we've taken enough risks already."

The small vessel took off a short while later, and the Jedi and Lena settled in for the journey. Though the ship was not nearly as large or as fancy as the *Degarian II*, Qui-Gon noticed that a sense of calm came over the group as they rose into the air. They were finally leaving Frego behind.

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When the ship was about halfway to Coruscant, Qui-Gon was startled out of his meditative state by the buzz of his comlink. A moment later Yoda's familiar voice began to speak.

"Been attacked the *Degarian II* has," he said simply. His statement was followed by a few seconds of silence. Then, "Survivors there are not."

Chapter Eighteen

Jedi Master Mace Windu met Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Lena at the landing platform. It had been a long journey, and it was afternoon on the city-planet of Coruscant. The sun was high in the sky, making reflections on the thousands of on-planet transport vehicles and glinting off of the towering skyscrapers.

"You must be Lena Cobral," Master Windu said, taking her hand for a moment. "It is good to finally meet you."

He looked at each of them in turn before leading them into the Jedi Temple. "We are grateful that you are safe," he said. "The news of Senator Crote came as a surprise, and obviously not a pleasant one. Then when the *Degarian II* was destroyed..."

Obi-Wan winced as he remembered how close they had all come to being killed.

"We would like to get Lena on the stand as soon as possible," he said, changing the subject.

"Of course," Mace agreed. "The chancellor has called a special hearing for this afternoon. It is scheduled to start in just a few hours. The entire senate will be present."

"Excellent," Qui-Gon said. "We do not want to give Senator Crote or the Cobral time to realize that their plan has failed – that we are all still very much alive." He briefly touched Lena's

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shoulder. "And we can take care of this matter once and for all. It is best for Frego, I think."

Lena nodded. "In the meantime I'd like to freshen up and change my clothes." She gestured to her dirty travel clothing. "I fear this is not appropriate for a special session of the Galactic Senate."

Obi-Wan smiled. Even under extreme pressure, Lena attended to details. He would miss her when their mission was over, he realized. And it would be over very soon.

"We have readied some chambers in the Fregan consulate for you," Mace said. "We believe that Senator Crote will be out of the building until the hearing. But if we run into him we must all behave as though we have not linked him to the Cobral in any way."

"I understand," Lena said. "But I hope you are right when you say he is out of the building."

Mace led the way to Lena's temporary quarters and the Jedi waited while she quickly freshened up and changed her clothes.

Obi-Wan was amazed when she reemerged a few minutes later. Her hair had been tied into an elaborate twist, and a pair of sparkling gem earrings dangled from her earlobes. A simple light blue gown hung just to her ankles. She looked lovely and not at all like she had been through a long, harrowing night.

The group left the consulate and went directly to the Senate.

Lena gasped when she entered the Senate chamber. "I had no idea the galaxy was so big!" she whispered to Obi-Wan nervously.

Obi-Wan gave her a reassuring smile. "You'll be fine," he whispered back. "Remember, you are doing what is right."

Lena squared her shoulders and nodded as the group took their place on the large floating platform. She took her seat as the platform smoothly glided toward the front of the giant chamber. The session was just beginning, and Senators from all over the galaxy were craning their heads to see who would be speaking at this special meeting.

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After a few minutes the murmur echoing throughout the room began to die down. Chancellor Valorum signaled to Lena that it was time for her to speak.

Steadying herself on her chair, she got to her feet. For a moment she was silent as she looked out at the thousands of faces staring back at her. Obi-Wan could only guess at what was running through her mind. She had been through so much, come so far. Now her fate was in the hands of strangers. Would they believe her? Would they care?

Lena's voice did not wobble as she spoke out about the Cobral. When she linked the crime family to Senator Crote there was a murmur in the chamber followed by respectful silence. Obi-Wan could tell Lena had the attention of every being in the room as she spoke of crimes, abused power, and the evil Cobral hold on Frego. Then she told her own story, including the death of her husband and cousin. And finally Senator Crote's attempt to have them all killed.

There was an uproar in the chamber as a stunned Senator Crote leaped to his feet. "You are lying!" he shouted. "I have done nothing but good for your planet!"

But Obi-Wan could tell by the look on the senator's face that the man knew the tide was against him as Lena presented the proof – not only his link to the thug who had attacked her, but transmissions that linked him definitively with the destruction of the *Degarian II*. His political career – and in fact his life as a free man was over.

It did not take long to tally the vote. Senator Crote was removed from office, and the Cobral were immediately ordered under arrest, to be tried for their crimes. Once a new government was in place, a new senator of Frego would be elected.

Obi-Wan beamed. He was so proud of Lena, of all that she had accomplished for her planet and her people.

Because of her, Frego would finally get its new beginning, its chance at a new life.

Chapter Nineteen

Back at the Fregan consulate, a small party was going on in Lena's chambers. There was much talk of the success of the testimony and the new road ahead. A few senators were so impressed by Lena's testimony that they suggested she run for the Fregan senatorial position.

"I have no interest in such a position," she replied flatly. "I will return to Frego to help put the transition government in place. But afterward it will be time for me to start a new life on a new planet."

She winked at Obi-Wan, and he had a feeling that politics were definitely in Lena's future. Perhaps she would get a position as an aide of some sort on Coruscant. If she did, he realized, he might get to see her from time to time....

After the small group had shared a celebratory meal together, Lena announced that she wanted to get some rest. "So much has happened, and I'd like a little time to digest it all. Soon enough I'll be heading back to Frego. I'm afraid I won't be getting much rest there."

Qui-Gon nodded. He knew how much work it was to change governments. "I certainly think a rest is in order," he said. "Jedi Master Mace Windu and I have Temple business to attend to,

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but I will be back shortly. Obi- Wan can stay with you, if you like."

"That's very kind, but I'd really like some time alone," Lena replied graciously.

Obi-Wan tried to hide his disappointment as he nodded. "Of course," he said.

While Mace and Qui-Gon left for the Temple, Obi-Wan lingered outside Lena's door. He wanted to respect her wishes, but also wanted to stay close by in case she changed her mind. The door to the adjacent chamber was open and the room was empty. Obi-Wan entered and sat down in a comfortable chair. From here he could hear what was going on in Lena's room.

Obi-Wan had just closed his eyes when he heard a familiar voice. It was not Lena's, and it was not friendly.

"Surprised to see me, Lena dear?" it said. "I suppose you would be. But then I thought you loved surprises."

There was a muffled sound, as if the intruder was fiddling with some clothing. Then Obi-Wan heard Lena gasp.

Obi-Wan was out in the hallway in less than a second. With his hand on his lightsaber, he pressed the door controls. But nothing happened. The door was jammed.

Obi-Wan ignited his lightsaber. He'd have to cut through the door. But as his blade touched the entrance, something told him not to cut.

Concentrating, he closed his eyes. He heard a very slight scraping right in front of him. Lena was just centimeters away – on the other side of the door. There was no way for him to cut through without putting her at risk.

"I should have done this years ago," the intruder continued. "Perhaps then I could have saved my favorite son. The one I loved the most. The one I cherished."

Zanita.

"I tried to save him, I really did. But once word got out that he wanted to betray the family – that you had talked him into

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testifying against his own flesh and blood, there was nothing I could do. It was a great loss for me, yes. But necessary."

Lena let go of a sob. "Necessary?" she echoed in disbelief. "Zanita, he was your own son!"

"I know that, Lena. Actually, I rather wished he had been a daughter. You see, boys and men are nothing but foolish pawns. They always need to be told what to do, and half the time they still do it wrong. Things on Frego were a mess until I took control. I organized our forces and got the government to see matters our way. Everything was going just fine until you came along. You stole my Rutin's heart and coerced his mind."

"Rutin had a mind of his own," Lena said quietly.

Scanning the wall, Obi-Wan tried to remember the position of everything inside the quarters. His hands were damp with sweat, and his heart was pounding. He didn't have much time to act, or any room for error.

Zanita acted as if she didn't hear her daughter-in-law. "And now because of you I stand to lose my other two sons as well," she went on. "But of course I'm not going to let that happen."

Obi-Wan heard an ominous click. He had to act – he just hoped he wasn't already too late. Raising his lightsaber, he pushed the blade into the wall.

"Would you like a moment to fix your hair, darling?" Zanita asked. "You might be seeing Rutin in a few moments."

Obi-Wan sliced through the wall with remarkable speed – and stepped inside just in time to see Lena fall to the floor, meters away. She landed with a sickening thud and lay completely still.

Still holding a blaster in her hand, Zanita leveled the barrel at her daughter-in-law's chest. She did not seem to be aware of Obi-Wan's presence.

Obi-Wan tore his eyes away from Lena and took several steps toward Zanita. She whirled around suddenly, the blaster now aimed at him.

"Ah, a Jedi," she said. "Of course."

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She fired several rapid blasts. Obi-Wan was surprised by her incredible accuracy, and had to dodge and weave to avoid being hit by two and deflect three of the bolts with his saber at the same time.

Stepping forward, he felt one of the bolts graze his robe. He spun around and leaped into the air, landing on Zanita's right side and grabbing the blaster. Zanita hurled herself forward onto Lena's body. Her shoulders shook violently as several sobs escaped her throat.

The true leader of the Cobral had been defeated, and was probably thinking of the time she would soon be spending in prison.

Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber and re-clipped it to his belt. There was a small hole in his robe where the blaster bolt had grazed him.

He fingered it gingerly, grateful that he was not wounded. But Lena.. .

All of a sudden Obi-Wan heard a rushing sound behind him.

"Obi-Wan, look out!" someone shouted. It was Qui-Gon.

For a split second Obi-Wan was not sure where to look. Then he saw the glimmer of a weapon in Zanita's hand. It was a vibroblade.

Before Obi-Wan could disarm her a second time, Zanita had plunged the reverberating blade into her chest.

A moment later she fell to the floor next to Lena, dead.

Chapter Twenty

Qui-Gon looked up from his sleep couch in his quarters at the Jedi Temple to see his Padawan standing in the doorway.

"I thought you might like to come with me to see Lena," he explained.

Obi-Wan shifted his feet slightly, and Qui-Gon was reminded of the young boy he had taken as a Padawan learner more than four years before. Impatient and headstrong, but also unsure. They had come a long way since then. But at that moment Qui-Gon was very aware that the younger Jedi still sought his affection and approval. Qui-Gon could not blame him, and was even grateful. Soon enough Obi-Wan would be a Jedi Knight in his own right, and would no longer need him. For the moment, however, he was still a boy.

Things between them had not been very smooth of late, Qui-Gon knew. He felt a twinge of guilt. He was not sure why it was so difficult for him to confide in the boy when it came to his feelings. Like many things, it simply was.

"I would like that," Qui-Gon said, getting to his feet. "How is she doing?"

"The blow to her head when she fell was quite severe," Obi-Wan replied. "But she is recovering well and is set to be released

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this afternoon. She is planning to return to Frego the day after tomorrow."

Qui-Gon set his pace to match Obi-Wan's as they made their way down the corridor. "Physical wounds heal quickly," he said quietly. "It is the emotional ones that require more time."

Qui-Gon was silent as they made their way down the hall. Then he spoke. "When Tahl died, the wound was so broad and so deep that I was certain I could not live. I could not go on. And in my pain I was blind to those around me – those who also loved and mourned Tahl."

"I grieved her as well," Obi-Wan said. "But I knew that my grief did not match yours, that it never would. I did not know how to help you. I was lost."

Suddenly Qui-Gon stopped and turned to face his Padawan. "I am the one who was lost, Padawan. You were generous and patient with me. And I needed that patience. I still carry the wound I suffered when I lost Tahl. I will for the rest of my life."

Obi-Wan nodded solemnly. "I know," he said softly.

Qui-Gon placed a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. "I am grateful for your efforts to help me through my pain. For a long time I was not ready to hear your words, but you were still right to speak them. Thanks to you I have found myself again – I have found a way to go on. Your words... *you* are a comfort to me. Thank you."

Obi-Wan let out a deep breath and smiled. "You're welcome," he said.

Book Eighteen
The Threat Within

Chapter One

Obi-Wan Kenobi stood perfectly still. He sensed no movement in the darkened room, yet his muscles were tensed, ready for attack. The only light came from the glowing blue blade of his lightsaber. The only discernible sounds were the hum of the blade and the Jedi's almost undetectable breathing. Obi-Wan had been standing in the same position, balanced on a thin rail, for nearly an hour. Still, he waited.

Suddenly Qui-Gon's voice penetrated the silence, breaking Obi-Wan's concentration. A message from his Master over the comlink was not what Obi-Wan had expected. Momentarily distracted, he almost missed the stealth-training probe moving rapidly toward his head. *That* was what he had been waiting for.

Obi-Wan turned awkwardly on the slim rail and sliced the probe out of the air. Leaping high to another unseen rail, he knocked out two more probes. A moment later the lights in the room came on and the young Jedi deactivated his lightsaber.

Obi-Wan shook his head. The exercise was complete, but the seventeen-year-old Jedi was not pleased with his performance.

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan replied to Qui-Gon over the comlink.

"We've been summoned by the Council. Meet me there."

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"Of course," Obi-Wan replied. Hope sprang within him. Perhaps the Council had at last summoned them for a mission. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had spent the last two months at the Temple. It was always a relief to come home when a mission was complete, but Obi-Wan did not like to stay too long.

Being a Jedi was constant work. And somehow the dedication, energy, and patience it required seemed to intensify when Obi-Wan was at the Temple, when he wasn't working toward a mission's specific objective.

Jedi never stopped learning. But after endless training exercises, Obi-Wan could feel his focus begin to slip. He should not have been so clumsy with the training probes. He should have been prepared for anything. He was growing bored, and that was dangerous.

Outside the Council Chambers, Obi-Wan spotted his Master's large frame. Even with his back turned, Obi-Wan could sense that Qui-Gon shared none of his eager anticipation, his anxiety. As always his Master exuded calm. Qui-Gon was almost always content with training and meditation alone. Why did Obi-Wan crave action?

Qui-Gon smiled and nodded at his approaching Padawan before activating the door and entering the chamber. A half step behind, Obi-Wan followed as Qui-Gon strode to the center of the room and acknowledged the seated Masters.

Obi-Wan's pulse quickened slightly. But it was nothing like the nervousness he used to feel when summoned to appear before the Council.

Mace Windu leaned back in his chair, his arm draped across the back. "We've received a message from Vorzyd 4," he said plainly. "They report that they are being sabotaged by Vorzyd 5 and have requested mediation. The planets in the Vorzyd system have never been engaged in war of any kind. But tensions have been brewing between the fourth and fifth planets. All of the planets are interdependent and a dispute between two could

trigger a chain reaction, disrupting the whole cluster. Clearly this is something we wish to avoid."

"So the situation is delicate," Obi-Wan finished Master Windu's thought and immediately regretted it. It would not do to reveal his impatience to the Council.

"Very," Mace continued, appearing to notice neither Obi-Wan's eagerness nor his interruption. "And to make matters more complicated, Vorzyd 5 denies any wrongdoing."

"Before you can bring these planets together to talk you will need to assess the matter carefully," Master Yarael Poof added. "There may be more at stake here than meets the eye."

Obi-Wan saw Qui-Gon nod slowly, and knew that their work would begin before they even left the Temple. He had heard of the Vorzyd cluster before, but only in passing. The next step was a visit to the Temple archives. Mediation required a good deal of research and background knowledge. The Jedi would have to be prepared for any possible conflict.

Jocasta Nu was ready when the Jedi arrived. She spent most of her time pulling research for Jedi missions. Although she was regularly briefed by a member of the Council as to what planets or systems might soon require Jedi assistance, her ability to access just the right information at just the right time was uncanny. She could almost always sense the moment when a brewing problem was about to boil over.

The viewscreen in the archives was playing a recorded communication from Chairman Port, the leader of Vorzyd 4, when Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon entered the room. Jocasta quickly shut it off.

"Sending you to Vorzyd 4, are they?" she asked with a chuckle. "I'm sure that will be a productive trip." Obi-Wan did not get the joke. But as Jocasta told them more about the Vorzyd 4's, he began to understand.

The small planet was best known for its amazing production and sale of goods. Alone, Vorzyd 4 produced almost all of the food and hard goods used by the five planets in its system.

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"All of the inhabitants of Vorzyd 4 work," Jocasta explained. "Children begin working at the age of ten, when their school cycle wanes. Instead of attending school seven days they attend six and work one. Each year thereafter they gain another day of work until the age of seventeen, when they begin to work full-time. From then they work seven days a week." Jocasta narrowed her eyes. Obi-Wan thought he sensed disapproval. Even Jedi rested sometimes.

"At age seventy, laborers are required to retire," Jocasta continued. "Vorzydiaks fear that the elderly will not be able to keep up with the work pace. Sadly, most of the retirees die within a few weeks of being forced out of their jobs. The cause of these deaths is unknown. Most retirees are in good health until they are forced to stop working."

Obi-Wan glanced at his Master to see what he thought of this practice. Qui-Gon was in his fifties, and Obi-Wan could not imagine that anyone would think of him as anything other than productive. And Master Yoda was over eight hundred years old. It was unthinkable that he be asked to retire. His wisdom was one of the Council's most valuable assets.

The thought of someone asking these Jedi to step down made Obi-Wan smile, but Qui-Gon shot him a stern look and he quickly checked himself.

Of course, Vorzydiaks on Vorzyd 4 were unique beings with unique life cycles and cultural practices. Although they looked mostly human – their bodies were humanoid but they had a pair of long antennae and slightly larger eyes – Obi-Wan knew better than to judge them by any other beings' standards.

"What of Vorzyd 5?" Qui-Gon asked. "And the tensions between the two planets?"

"Vorzyd 5 produces less than half of its planetary needs and depends largely on trade with Vorzyd 4 for its subsistence. In the past they struggled and were often in debt to Vorzyd 4, though relations between the two have remained peaceful and friendly. Debt did not matter to the 4's because they had a constant

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surplus. Neither were the 5's troubled that they owed so many credits to their neighbor. But now things have changed."

"How so?" asked Obi-Wan.

"Vorzyd 5 has begun building casinos. The profit they've made has allowed them to pay off many of their interplanetary debts."

"And they are no longer beholden to Vorzyd 4," Qui-Gon said softly.

"Exactly. Vorzyd 4 claims that Vorzyd 5 now wants to be the planet in power. That they are sabotaging Vorzyd 4's production in order to appear stronger to the rest of the system, and the galaxy. Vorzyd 5, of course, claims this is nonsense. And the continued accusations are making them very angry."

Handing Qui-Gon a stack of disks, Jocasta replayed Chairman Port's message. The large man on the screen looked uncomfortable, but his plea was direct.

"I am contacting you to request mediation. We are being attacked. Vorzyd 5 is to blame. All diplomats and suspected spies have been expelled. The sabotage continues. Please contact us at once." As he talked, the ends of Chairman Port's antennae moved about like birds looking for a place to land.

"It is unusual that the chairman has contacted us," Jocasta said once the image had disappeared from the screen. "In the past Vorzydiaks have had little contact with the galaxy outside their cluster. They were even reluctant to have representation in the Senate. The fact that they have requested outside help can only mean that they feel their situation is desperate."

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan thanked the archivist and left with stacks of additional information to review on their own. Obi-Wan did not relish the task. This mission, he realized, would not provide the action he craved. The Vorzyd system sounded dull, and diplomacy was often a long and tedious process. Obi-Wan sighed and inwardly scolded himself. He knew he should be grateful for any mission. At least it was a change.

Chapter Two

Qui-Gon started down the shuttle ramp before it touched the floor of the hangar on Vorzyd 4. He had spent the entire journey reviewing information about the planets and their history, and was anxious to move around and get some fresh air. All of the disks held data about the planets' corporate history, and while Vorzyd 4's success as a peaceful corporation was admirable, it had been dry research. Qui-Gon had been totally unable to get any sense of what Vorzydiaks were like as individuals.

The hangar they'd landed in was uncluttered. Aside from the workers loading cargo on what appeared to be export ships, there were not many beings about.

"Are we being met?" Obi-Wan asked. He stifled a yawn as he joined Qui-Gon outside the shuttle. Qui-Gon guessed his Padawan's research had not been any more entertaining than his own.

Before Qui-Gon could reply in the affirmative, a young Vorzydiak appeared before them. He stood for a moment, then bowed slightly to the Jedi. His demeanor was calm, but his antennae twitched nervously. Qui-Gon knew that it was unlikely the Vorzydiak had encountered beings from outside his planetary system before.

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"Welcome. Follow me," their guide said without expression. He turned and walked quickly out of the hangar. The Jedi had to follow at a rapid pace to keep up.

Qui-Gon had been looking forward to talking with the young Vorzydiak. He'd hoped it would help him to understand the species better. But after the brief greeting, the Vorzydiak offered nothing more. He simply led them briskly through the streets.

When Qui-Gon tried to ask one or two questions it was obvious by the confused looks and twitching antennae that they made the guide uncomfortable. Perhaps Chairman Port had asked their guide not to say anything. Qui-Gon decided to give himself over to the observation of his surroundings. He would come to know the Vorzydiaks soon enough.

The streets of Vorzyd 4 were nearly empty. Though it was midday there were no beings about. Nor did Qui-Gon see any refreshment vendors or public spaces.

The buildings were tall and six-sided. There were no arched doorways or awnings. No large windows or ornamentation. Not one scrap of material was wasted on style or aesthetics. Everything appeared to be designed for maximum efficiency, including the hexagonal system the buildings were laid out in and their drab color-coding.

Glancing at the Vorzydiak in front of them, Qui-Gon realized that the same was true of clothing on Vorzyd 4. So far everyone he had seen wore a plain, closely fitted one-color jumpsuit. They did not even have collars.

The three had not been walking long when the Vorzydiak stopped in front of a nondescript, pale brown building. The plate next to the entrance read MULTYCORP. The guide activated the door and motioned the Jedi inside. Expecting to enter some sort of portico or hallway, Qui-Gon was surprised to find that they were inside a turbolift that was rising to the twenty-fourth floor. A droid like voice called the names of each floor as they whizzed past. "Assembly seven, Assembly eight, Manufacture

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nine, Manufacture ten..." until they reached "Accounting twenty-four."

The door slid open and a tall Vorzydiak rushed into the lift without waiting for the others to get off. He nearly ran into Obi-Wan.

"Unproductive entrance," the Vorzydiak guide murmured.

The tall Vorzydiak glared at the group but said nothing. Qui-Gon wondered who he was.

"Do you know him?" he asked the guide.

The guide shook his head and led the Jedi out of the turbolift and through a maze of beige workspaces. Hundreds of jumpsuit-clad Vorzydiaks sat close together, speaking into headsets and inputting information onto data-screens.

Though many of the beings spoke at once, the overall effect was a low drone. No single voice could be heard above another. There was no idle chatter among the laborers. And aside from the Vorzyd numeric symbol posted above each station, there was no way of telling the workspaces apart.

Could this be where Chairman Port rules his planet? Qui-Gon wondered. *From a Vorzyd plant?* Qui-Gon glanced at his Padawan and Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows slightly. Obviously he was as surprised and perplexed as his Master.

"Wait here," the guide instructed. He motioned the Jedi into a small room dominated by a large table surrounded by benches. Then he scurried away, disappearing into the maze.

A moment later Chairman Port appeared in the doorway. Had he not seen the chairman's image in the Temple archives, Qui-Gon would not have been able to guess that this man was a planetary leader. He wore the same pale jumpsuit as the rest of the planet's inhabitants, and his manner was no more self-assured. Though his expression did not change, his antennae twitched when he spoke.

"We are glad you have come," he said. He crossed the room quickly and sat down at one of the benches surrounding the large table. "All known Vorzydiaks from Vorzyd 5 have been cast off

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our planet. Still there are attacks. They want to lower our productivity. The attacks must stop."

Qui-Gon drew a deep breath. "I understand that so far no one has been hurt in the attacks."

"That is true." Port's antennae twitched faster.

"The saboteurs have concentrated on things that slow productivity?" Obi-Wan prompted, hoping the chairman would fill in the details.

"Yes. Productivity is hurt. We are unable to work." Chairman Port's head bobbed up and down in a nod.

"Why do you suspect Vorzyd 5?" Qui-Gon asked. "Have they taken credit for any of the attacks? Have they outlined terms or made any demands?"

Qui-Gon understood that after having been at the mercy of Vorzyd 4 for some time, Vorzyd 5 might harbor resentment. But taking action against a neighboring planet seemed rash, especially if Vorzyd 5 was prospering in its own right.

"We must stop Vorzyd 5," Chairman Port said, not acknowledging Qui-Gon's inquiries. "You will contact them?"

Qui-Gon was about to reply when the chairman stood. He was obviously anxious for the meeting to be over. "To work then?" he said.

Qui-Gon remained seated. He had many more questions and a strong feeling that all was not as it seemed. "Before we contact Vorzyd 5, I would like to inspect the sabotage sites. One should never be hasty in making accusations."

Chairman Port seemed to hover over Qui-Gon, but he didn't say anything.

Qui-Gon continued. "I would also like to spend at least one night here on Vorzyd 4, to get an idea of how you live... when you're not working."

Chairman Port's antennae moved so furiously they looked as if they would tie themselves in knots. "Not working?" he asked, puzzled. "We eat. We sleep. Nothing more."

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The chairman was clearly frustrated with the Jedi's thought process. He wanted immediate action. "I will take you to the homespace when the workday is – "

Chairman Port was cut off when a laborer rushed into the room. "Vorzyd 5!" she said. "Another attack!" Her high-pitched voice revealed her distress. "Productivity status monitors are registering erroneous data."

Port rushed from the room and glanced at the nearest datascreen. "Six days behind schedule on hard goods distribution," he mumbled. "It cannot be."

Everywhere laborers stood up from their stations and looked around, bewildered. Qui-Gon noticed that when their eyes rested on the Jedi in their flowing brown robes, their already vibrating antennae would wave even more wildly. In this environment even the subdued Jedi dress made them stick out like pulsating beacons.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan followed Chairman Port to the turbolift. As they made their way through the maze, Qui-Gon noted a few of the laborers rocking back and forth. Others appeared to be physically ill, grasping their stomachs and leaning on their desks.

As the turbolift doors closed, Qui-Gon heaved a deep sigh. Obviously the Vorzyd 4's were unable to handle anything outside of their normal work routine. Only the chairman seemed to maintain relative calm, though he didn't look particularly well, either.

This was going to be a very interesting mission.

Chapter Three

Obi-Wan sat in front of the mainframe computer. He had been there for almost an hour. The Vorzydiak technician assigned to the station paced behind him, stopping regularly to peer over Obi-Wan's shoulder. Occasionally the tech's antennae grazed the back of Obi-Wan's head and neck and he could be heard mumbling something about Vorzyd 5.

Obi-Wan's Master had gone with Chairman Port to try to calm the laborers. The threat to the Vorzydiaks' physical and mental health was equal to their technical difficulties. If the chairman could not get the laborers to calm down, he would have a health crisis on his hands. Judging from the stress level Obi-Wan still felt in the building, he did not think Qui-Gon was having much luck.

Obi-Wan wasn't having much luck, either. The problem with the computer system was not a simple one. Obi-Wan knew he couldn't clear it up quickly, but was hoping to learn something about who had started it while he tried.

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the anomaly was gone. All of the computers in the building were back on-line, running as if the bug had never been there. And there was no trace of what had happened on any of the machines.

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Obi-Wan motioned to the nervous tech, who nodded and spoke into a comlink on the wall. "Back on-line. Laborers to resume work immediately."

A few of the techs nearby looked at Obi-Wan gratefully as they settled back into their workstations. They thought *he* had fixed the problem.

The rest of the Vorzydiaks busied themselves, relieved to have things functioning normally once more. Even the very sick Vorzydiaks struggled to their data stations.

Obi-Wan stayed where he was. He wanted to continue to search the systems, to see if he could determine what had caused the mysterious problem and maybe come to understand the Vorzydiaks. But the tech standing beside him clearly wanted Obi-Wan to move out of his spot.

"To work, then?" the tech asked, agitated.

Obi-Wan stood with a sigh. His curiosity was not reason enough to cause the Vorzydiak discomfort.

On his way back to the twenty-fourth floor, Obi-Wan considered what he knew. Unfortunately, it wasn't much. The saboteur had been someone who knew the computer system as well as or better than the techs who ran it. But there was definitely no evidence that the Vorzyd 5's had planted the bug. Obi-Wan suspected that the culprit was an insider – or at least a spy.

Before Obi-Wan could share his suspicions with Qui-Gon and the chairman, a long, dull tone sounded in the building. The Vorzydiak laborers groaned in unison, echoing the tone. It was a strange, disappointed sound that penetrated Obi-Wan's skin. Obi-Wan wasn't sure if the laborers were frustrated that their workday had been cut short due to the interruption, or if the sad sound was one they made every day when it was time to leave.

Like the other laborers, Chairman Port seemed to struggle to tear himself away. At last he stood and motioned for the Jedi to follow him.

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Vorzydiaks poured en masse from buildings like slow-moving liquid. Though they stood very close to one another, they gave Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan a wide berth, even aboard the packed shuttles they all rode to the Vorzydiak home-space. Obi-Wan was sorry to see that his presence made the Vorzydiaks uncomfortable, but was grateful for the space just the same. It allowed him to look out the transparisteel sides of the shuttle.

As they left the city workspace, Obi-Wan waited for the landscape to change. He'd assumed that the identical buildings would fall away and reveal the natural planet landscape, or at least some parks and open spaces. But he was wrong.

On the outskirts of the city the workspace turned to homespace. But if Chairman Port had not announced that they were in Vorzydiak homespace, Obi-Wan would not have known. The homespace buildings were slightly smaller and stationed around hubs where automated shuttles and airbuses picked up and dropped off passengers. Otherwise it looked exactly like the workspace.

There were no yards. No pads for private vehicles. No Vorzydiaks relaxing outside.

In light of this, the Jedi were not surprised to see that the chairman's home, like his workstation and dress, did not differ from the rest of the population's. He lived on a single floor of one of the high-rises.

"My wife, Bryn," the chairman said, introducing them to a slight Vorzydiak wearing a blandly colored jumpsuit. "The Jedi, Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi," Port gestured.

Bryn's antennae fidgeted as she looked the Jedi over.

"We appreciate your hospitality." Qui-Gon offered a hand. "Chairman Port has kindly invited us to share a meal in your home."

Bryn nodded again but did not take Qui-Gon's hand. Instead she turned toward the galley. After pressing a few buttons, she placed two more settings at the table that was already set for two.

"Grath will not be eating," she said. Chairman Port nodded.

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"Will he be home later?" Obi-Wan asked. He was anxious to meet the Ports' fifteen-year-old son. Vorzyd 4 seemed so... boring. He couldn't imagine what life must be like for the teenagers on the planet, and was hoping that they would be easier to talk to than the Vorzydiaks he'd already met.

"After mealtime. He is working," Bryn replied flatly.

While they waited for the meal to be served, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon looked around the small residence. It was furnished and reasonably comfortable, but revealed nothing about the inhabitants. It reminded Obi-Wan of the sterile spaces travelers could rent on Coruscant. With so many different species coming through, the quarters were designed to be nothing more than clean and inoffensive.

"Is Grath away from home often in the evenings?" Qui-Gon asked when they sat down to dine. "It must be disappointing when you cannot share your last meal of the day together."

Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon was also looking for a sign of emotional connection in the family.

"It is an honor to work," the chairman said tersely.

His wife nodded. "May he be as productive tomorrow as he is today," she said.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged a look as the table fell silent.

Obi-Wan chewed a particularly tough and flavorless bite of whatever food was in his bowl. "What do you do in the evenings, to entertain yourselves?" he asked, still hoping to spark some conversation. Though he was getting the feeling that the endeavor was useless, he felt he had to try.

Bryn looked up from her food, a confused expression on her face. "We read instructuals to better our work," she replied, as if it were obvious.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan wondered if Grath chose to work late to avoid the evening meal. He found it hard to imagine that the young people on Vorzyd 4 were as work-driven as their parents. In some ways, he thought, it was similar to life at the Temple.

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There, children and adults were completely dedicated to learning the ways of the Force. The path of the Jedi was fascinating, of course. Far more fascinating than anything Obi-Wan had seen here. But Obi-Wan had to admit that sometimes, at the Temple, he just wanted some time off – to take a break.

Looking up from his bowl, Obi-Wan noticed Qui-Gon staring at him. He felt his face redden. More than once Qui-Gon had seemed able to read his mind, and he hoped this was not one of those times.

Obi-Wan had felt frustrated lately, yes. But he did not wish to leave the Jedi path. He had done that once – and it had turned out to be the biggest mistake of his life. Still, there were times – especially when he felt he was not progressing – that he wondered where all of this hard work was leading him.

Chapter Four

Chairman Port led the Jedi into a building a short distance from his house. "This is our retirement complex. My mother lived here after she retired. Now she is dead. The room is empty," he said. His voice registered no feeling.

"I'm sorry to hear of your mother's passing," Qui-Gon said gently. "Was it recent?"

"One month ago," Port replied.

Qui-Gon noticed that Chairman Port's antennae quivered slightly. "It is difficult to lose a parent."

"Laborers do not last without work," Port replied steadily. But he stopped outside the retirement complex, as if he were reluctant to go in. "Second floor. Third door on the right," he said.

Pressing a key pass with access codes into Qui-Gon's hand, he turned to go. "Tomorrow we will contact Vorzyd 5. Work must go on."

As the door slid shut behind them, Qui-Gon heard a tapping in the corridor. Door lined halls stretched in all directions, and to the left a figure struggled toward them using a support. He waved to attract their attention. It was an elderly Vorzydiak.

"To work," he called in a raspy voice. "Is the shuttle here? To work. " Obi-Wan started toward the nearly crippled being, but

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Qui-Gon put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. The Vorzydiak turned and walked in the other direction, still rambling. He had not been talking to them. He was raving to no one in particular, and Qui-Gon knew there was nothing they could do to help.

Port's mother's room was as gloomy as the rest of the complex. But it held two sleep couches, and was certainly adequate for the Jedi. Obi-Wan paced the small space between the couches. Qui-Gon knew he had been waiting for a chance to speak. A year ago he would have shared his thoughts by now. But his Padawan was growing older, wiser. He was becoming a Jedi.

"Master, I do not think that Vorzyd 5 is responsible for today's... mishap," Obi-Wan said. "I do not know who is responsible, but we must not contact Vorzyd 5 until we have a clearer sense of what is going on."

"Of course." Qui-Gon nodded.

"I feel... I feel that all is not right on Vorzyd 4," Obi-Wan continued. "There's something more here, there's some sort of... well, secret."

Qui-Gon nodded again. He had sensed it, too, but had not realized it until Obi-Wan said it aloud. There was a secret on Vorzyd 4. They would have to proceed very carefully.

Qui-Gon lay down and breathed deeply. Beside him, Obi-Wan did the same. It had been a strange day and Qui-Gon looked forward to meditation. But even after several minutes of trying to relax, the deep calm that usually filled him did not come.

Instead his mind was filled with images of Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan as a boy in a practice duel with Jedi student Bruck Chun, letting his anger rather than his instincts direct him. Then an image of Obi-Wan when he had gone to help him on Melida/Daan, wounded, humble, and brave enough to face his mistakes – even if doing so meant never becoming a Jedi. The boy had grown so much in the last four years. More than getting

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stronger and taller, he was learning to trust himself, his instincts, and the Force.

Another image of Obi-Wan flashed in Qui-Gon's mind. An older Obi-Wan, ready to begin the intensive path toward the trials. Soon he would be more man than boy. He would take the leap toward becoming a Jedi Knight.

Pride and sadness flooded Qui-Gon as he pictured Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi. He looked forward to the day that the two of them would work side by side as Jedi Knights, but with this thought no image came. Qui-Gon's chest tightened. He was so proud of Obi-Wan's path, of his achievements. Why couldn't he see him as a Knight? *Perhaps I do not want to see the boy grow up, he thought.*

The whir and click of the door forced the thought from Qui-Gon's mind. His eyes flew open. Immediately he saw that the room was empty. Obi-Wan was gone.

Chapter Five

Obi-Wan moved silently down the hall toward the exit. Unlike his Master, he had been too restless to meditate. Though he sometimes wished he had Qui-Gon's ability to calm his mind, he had learned when it was impossible and to simply accept it. There were times when it was best to put his energy to more active use.

The corridor in the retirement complex was dim and quiet, and Obi-Wan was almost through the door when a sound broke the silence. Startled, he turned on his heels. Was that laughter?

Obi-Wan quickly made his way back toward the noise. Rounding a corner, he spotted two Vorzydiaks – one young and one elderly – together in one of the retirement rooms. The elder sat on her sleep couch, while the other leaned casually against a wall.

"Grandfather was so silly," the younger Vorzydiak said.

The elder nodded. "That is what I loved about him." She smiled, and her small, thin body seemed to surge with energy as she straightened up on the sleep couch. "He was like a breath of fresh air. Of course, we are not allowed to show such silliness. Especially not now."

The young Vorzydiak nodded solemnly. "Things are going to change, Grandmother," she said. The girl glanced at a timepiece

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on her belt and pushed off the wall, moving toward her grandmother. "I have to go now, but I will be back soon."

The elder softly stroked her granddaughter's face with her antennae. Her eyes were full of sadness. "Promise me," she said softly. "I do not have much time."

The girl frowned and shook her head. "Do not say that, Grandmother. You might live for a long time." She wrapped her feelers around the elder's and they stood quietly together for several long moments.

In spite of the girl's words, Obi-Wan sensed that she knew her grandmother spoke the truth. The elder Vorzydiak was quite frail-looking, and it appeared as though her life systems were beginning to fade.

"To wor – " The elder stopped herself from giving the traditional Vorzyd greeting. "Goodbye, then," she said with a sad smile.

"See you soon, Grandmother," the girl replied in a near-whisper. But she waited a few more seconds before unwrapping her feelers from her grandmother's. Then she turned and quickly left the room.

Obi-Wan ducked behind a corner, not sure if the girl had seen him. He felt a little bit guilty, for the visit was clearly meant to be private. But he was glad to know that there were relationships on Vorzyd 4 that were emotional. It gave him a sense of hope.

The girl hurried down the corridor and out the door. Obi-Wan followed. Outside, the night was dark and still. There was no sound except the echo of the girl's footsteps. Most of the planet was clearly asleep.

As the girl slipped into a nearby building, another figure appeared just outside the Ports' dwelling. It was a boy. The Ports' son, Grath, Obi-Wan guessed. He felt a small surge of excitement. He had already gathered valuable information tonight and might be able to gather even more before the suns rose.

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Looking around furtively, Grath made his way across the street to the shuttle platform. This surprised Obi-Wan. If almost everyone was in bed, why would the shuttles be running? It would not be an efficient use of transportation.

While Obi-Wan hid in the shadows, Grath waited on the platform. It wasn't long before a small maintenance shuttle pulled up and came to a halt. A second later the doors opened, and Grath stepped inside.

Obi-Wan knew he wouldn't be able to ride in the shuttle without being seen. That left only one option...

Quickly scanning the outside of the vehicle, he spotted a durasteel overhang running along the top. It was a few meters above his head and very narrow. He wasn't sure it would bear his weight or if he could successfully hold on to it. There was nothing for his feet to rest on, and no way of knowing how long the ride was going to be.

Obi-Wan didn't have much time to think. At that moment the doors whisked closed. He leaped off the platform and grabbed the railing. His fingers arched over the top, barely securing a grip.

This was not going to be fun.

The small shuttle gradually picked up speed and was soon roaring along. Obi-Wan tried to ignore his aching arms and fingers so he could focus on the conversation taking place inside the shuttle. It was difficult with the vehicle's noise and the wind in his ears. But one of the portals was open, and he was able to overhear occasional tidbits.

"The meeting..." "Our best one yet..." "Our parents' attention..."

As he listened, Obi-Wan felt sure that he'd discovered Vorzyd 4's secret. The kids on this planet were up to something; there was a lot more going on than the adult laborers knew. It was even possible that the kids themselves were responsible for the sabotage.

Obi-Wan was wondering what the kids' motives were – as well as what their next prank would be – when he looked off to

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his right. The shuttle was about to enter a narrow tunnel, and he wasn't going to fit!

Chapter Six

Obi-Wan squeezed himself tightly against the side of the shuttle as it zoomed into the tunnel. The hard duracrete surface grazed the back of his tunic, but didn't scrape his skin. A moment later the tunnel widened and the shuttle came to a screeching halt.

Obi-Wan nearly went flying. Using all of his resolve, he tightened his grip on the railing. His knuckles were white and the tips of his fingers throbbed with pain. But he couldn't fall and risk being discovered. After what seemed like a long time, the shuttle came to a full stop. Obi-Wan let out a deep breath and slid carefully to the ground.

The shuttle doors opened again, and Grath exited along with the driver, who Obi-Wan now saw was female. The two chatted animatedly as they disappeared down a passageway.

Obi-Wan followed several paces behind. The passageway was dark, and he had to walk carefully because the floor was not entirely smooth.

Grath and the girl quickly made their way through a maze of hallways and up several flights of stairs. Obi-Wan noted that Vorzydiak kids walked rapidly, like the adults. For efficiency, he supposed. But their animated discussion was nothing like their parents' clipped method of communicating.

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When they emerged at the top of the stairs they were in a deserted office building. Empty desks and dusty tables and chairs were scattered around the space, which had clearly not been used for a while. A small group of kids had already gathered in a large, empty office. Obi-Wan decided not to enter the room, and hid under a large desk just outside the door.

"What took you so long?" one of the kids asked as Grath and the girl entered the office.

"Shuttle hang-up," Grath replied slowly.

There was a pause, and for a moment Obi-Wan was worried that Grath was talking about him. But he couldn't imagine why Grath would pretend not to see him if he had.

"Nania was late," Grath added.

Obi-Wan breathed a sigh of relief.

"My parents were watching me like a pair of harks," Nania explained. "I had to wait until they were asleep."

"Well, you're here now," a boy's voice said. "The Freelies meeting can officially begin."

There was a moment of silence while the kids all dropped their hands to their sides. Then everyone spoke at once. The words "It is to remain secret. It is to remain peaceful. It is to remain a surprise," echoed off the walls.

Obi-Wan was struck by how different this chanting was compared to the low drone the laborers made at the end of their workday. The kids' chant sounded alive and full of energy.

With the rules recited, the meeting began in earnest. From what Obi-Wan could gather, it centered around the youth reporting on their latest pranks and acts of sabotage. They took turns speaking, telling one another what they had done and how things had turned out. There was a lot of excitement in the voices, but the teens also waited patiently to speak. The meeting was energetic but orderly.

"We changed the traffic signals and the workers were an hour late for their posts," a boy reported.

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"My father came home furious about that," a girl piped up. "But I think I saw my mother smile when he told her about it."

"Good," Grath said. "We want to get them thinking."

"The fake work orders we gave at the electronics factory really got everyone confused," someone else said. "They were actually putting the machines together the wrong way for half the morning."

"I heard those machines played music instead of giving off static," reported another voice.

"Did they know it was music?" a girl asked.

As Obi-Wan listened, he felt torn. He was not sure that what the kids were doing was right. He had seen firsthand that it was causing confusion and distress to the adults. And the accusations against Vorzyd 5 were unfair. But he had to admit that if he were a boy on Vorzyd 4, he would get pleasure out of pulling pranks such as these – especially if faced with the bleak, work-filled future that lay ahead. And the kids were working together, putting their minds to creative use. Not to mention that they clearly trusted, liked, and relied on one another. That was more than many of the laborers could say.

Besides, Obi-Wan reasoned, nobody was really getting hurt. The Freelies' own rules plainly stated that the pranks were to be peaceful. And though he couldn't be certain, he suspected that they had a good motive. One Obi-Wan could believe in.

All of a sudden, images of Melida/Daan flashed in Obi-Wan's head. Death, destruction..

Melida/Daan was a planet ravaged by generations of civil war, and a group there called the Young was trying to bring an end to the fighting. Obi-Wan had felt strongly about the Young's cause, and had even left the Jedi path to join them.

The decision had been a mistake. While the ideas of the Young were just and good, the situation was complicated. There was fighting among the leaders, and deceit between the generations. Many of the Young were killed, and there was much bloodshed on the planet. Obi-Wan had been caught in the battle.

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When it was all over he felt as ravaged as the planet itself. He was grateful that the Jedi Council had agreed to take him back. He knew from experience that it was dangerous to believe too quickly in the causes of others.

Suddenly Obi-Wan felt crowded under the desk. He needed air and space. Sitting up, he felt better and could actually see the kids in the office. He noticed that some of them had adorned their jumpsuits with brightly colored scraps of fabric. Others wore homemade hats or bandannas on their heads. The group was still talking animatedly. Lost in his observations, Obi-Wan did not see the Vorzydiak girl coming toward him.

"Hey, what are you doing out here?" she asked.

Startled, Obi-Wan looked up and quickly pulled his hood over his head to hide the fact that he did not have antennae. Luckily the office building was quite dark.

"I'm not feeling well," Obi-Wan said, getting slowly to his feet. "I came out here to rest. But I think I should just go home."

The girl eyed him curiously. "What's with the funny clothes?" she asked.

Obi-Wan looked down at his Jedi robe. "It's my new bathrobe. I had to sneak out at the last minute and didn't have time to change." He looked at the girl's plain tunic and hoped that Vorzydiaks had different nightclothes. "Weird, isn't it?" he added shyly.

"I guess," the girl replied. Obi-Wan thought she looked a little doubtful, but she smiled casually before he headed down the corridor and out the door.

As he made his way down the steps, he heaved a sigh of relief. So far, so good.

Chapter Seven

Qui-Gon opened his eyes and sat up in a single fluid movement. The room was dark, but he did not need to look at his timepiece to know that it was very late. He did not need to see the empty couch to know that the room was still empty. Obi-Wan had not returned.

Where is he? Qui-Gon thought in frustration. *He should have conferred with me before leaving.*

Reaching into his Jedi robe, he found his com-link and switched it on. He was about to contact his Padawan when something told him not to.

Let the boy do some exploring. He is not a child who needs constant instruction any longer. He may be doing something important. And his investigations may prove fruitful to the mission.

Qui-Gon put his comlink away with a sigh. Again he was bombarded with images of his Padawan – images of a talented, impatient boy becoming a man. They had been through a lot together – revenge, deceit, war, death. And things had not always been smooth between them. They each had a strong will and those wills sometimes clashed. But they had also grown to depend on and trust each other. More than a formidable Jedi team, they loved each other and were true friends.

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As he looked around the empty room, Qui-Gon wanted Obi-Wan to stay a young man forever. He did not want him to change, to grow up.

If he does, I will lose him, he thought. Just as I have lost TabL

Qui-Gon was horrified at his own desire – how could he want such a thing? Obi-Wan had his own life to live, his own destiny. It was not Qui-Gon's place to interfere with or wish it to be any different than it was meant to be.

As he lay back on his sleep couch, guilt and sadness kept him awake. He tried to let the emotions flow out of him.

It was a long time before they finally did.

Qui-Gon was resting peacefully when Obi-Wan returned. As the door slid closed behind his Padawan, Qui-Gon sensed his excitement. Energy sparked from the boy like an electric current. Qui-Gon sat up.

Obi-Wan turned on a soft light and sat down on his sleep couch. "Master," he said, his eyes shining. "I have news. I have learned many things that will help us in this mission."

Qui-Gon smiled. Just a year or so ago Obi-Wan would have burst out with whatever news he had like an excited boy. Now he was introducing it in a logical fashion, in spite of his stimulated state.

"Go on," Qui-Gon prodded gently.

"There are two things," Obi-Wan explained. "The first is that Vorzydiaks are capable of sharing strong emotional bonds. I saw a young girl with her grandmother, and it was clear from their interaction that they loved each other very much."

Qui-Gon was glad to hear this news. Somehow it was comforting to know that the Vorzyd 4's had more emotions than they usually displayed. "And the other piece of information?"

"That is even bigger news," Obi-Wan said. "Vorzyd 5 is definitely not responsible for the pranks."

Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow. "And I assume you are going to tell me who is?" he asked.

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Obi-Wan inhaled slightly. "Freelies Vorzydiak kids."

Qui-Gon was quiet for a moment, letting this information sink in. It changed their mission considerably.

"I followed some kids to a secret meeting and listened from outside the room," Obi-Wan explained. "If I can pass myself off as a Vorzydiak boy, I can pretend to join the cause and gather all kinds of information about the kids and what they are trying to do. Then we can – "

"Absolutely not," Qui-Gon interrupted. "Infiltration is not part of our assignment. We must tell Chairman Port what is happening."

Obi-Wan opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. Qui-Gon got the feeling that it took all of his Padawan's resolve not to explode in frustration.

Obi-Wan took some time to gather his thoughts, standing up and moving across the room before turning back to face his Master. Qui-Gon could almost see his mind working.

"This society is clearly unhealthy," Obi-Wan finally said in a calm voice. "It is not working for its people. The youths' actions are an obvious cry for help. If we are not careful about how we expose their involvement, we risk ruining everything. We may as well say good-bye to any hope of change."

Obi-Wan stopped speaking for a minute but continued to look his Master in the eye. Qui-Gon sensed that he was not going to back down.

"The Vorzydiak 4's would be better served if we prepare both sides for the confrontation ahead," Obi-Wan finished. "It will still be a mediation, just not between the parties we expected."

Qui-Gon looked at his Padawan. He stood near the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes burned with determination, but not an angry one. He simply believed that this was the best path for the mission to take.

Qui-Gon disagreed. They had not been summoned by the Council to infiltrate the Vorzydiaks. They should simply explain that Vorzyd 5 was not to blame and leave Vorzyd 4 to sort out

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its own troubles. The Jedi were keepers of peace, not politicians or spies.

But then, missions often didn't go as planned. And this one was no exception. Nothing on Vorzyd 4 was as they'd expected. The dinner they'd shared with the Ports was not just culturally different, but stifled and awkward. He'd sensed that Bryn was unhappy, perhaps even depressed. Relations between the generations could certainly be described as unhealthy. But was this the way to fix it, and was doing so within their mandate?

Qui-Gon stood up and paced the room. Wasn't he constantly telling Obi-Wan to trust his instincts? How could he give the boy such guidance and then never let him act on it?

Because you are afraid to let him go, afraid of the day you won't be his Master.

"Master?" Obi-Wan's voice cut into Qui-Gon's thoughts. He had not meant to be silent for so long. Obi-Wan was looking at him, waiting patiently for a response.

Qui-Gon exhaled a long breath. "You may gather information for three days," he said. "But you must keep me informed of all happenings. And if after that time you have not convinced the Freelies to come forward and discuss matters with the adults themselves, I will have to report their involvement in the pranks to Chairman Port."

Obi-Wan dropped his hands to his sides and smiled. His blue eyes clearly showed his gratitude. "Thank you," he said.

Qui-Gon nodded. He was not at all certain that he'd made the right decision.

Chapter Eight

Obi-Wan immediately began to formulate his plans. He was a bit surprised that Qui-Gon had let him take the lead in the mission, but he was pleased as well. It was the first time Qui-Gon had given him so much responsibility.

Perhaps he is beginning to think of me as a peer and not just a pupil, Obi-Wan thought. The young Jedi had been waiting a long time for an opportunity like this, and was determined to succeed.

Lying on his sleep couch, Obi-Wan recounted what he'd overheard at the Freelies meeting. The more he could remember, the better his chances of infiltrating successfully. It seemed he had just fallen asleep when his Master was gently rousing him awake.

"Time to get up," Qui-Gon said. "The Ports will be waiting."

Obi-Wan got up and dressed quickly. But when they arrived at the Ports' dwelling the family had already left for the day. Cold kibi and patot panak were on the table, and the Jedi dutifully sat down to eat despite the fact that the food did not look particularly appetizing.

A message on the databoard asked the Jedi to come to Chairman Port's office in the workspace as soon as they could. He wanted to contact Vorzyd 5 immediately.

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"I'll have to find a way to stall him," Qui-Gon said aloud as he bit into a panak.

Obi-Wan nodded. "I'd like to visit the Vorzyd school today, Master," he said. "There's no point in waiting for another secret meeting to occur – it would waste valuable time."

"That is probably wise. But be careful, Padawan." He paused, then added, "And I suppose I do not need to tell you to keep your eyes and ears open at all times, since that's exactly what got us to where we are right now."

Obi-Wan thought for a moment that his Master was scolding him, but his eyes showed amusement as he looked across the table at his apprentice.

"No, I suppose you don't," Obi-Wan agreed.

When Qui-Gon had left the homespace, Obi-Wan found his way to Grath's clothing container and borrowed a drab, one-piece jumpsuit. Then, to conceal the fact that he didn't have antennae, he made a makeshift turban using the hood from his robe.

"It's not exactly high fashion," he told his goofy-looking reflection. But some of the kids he'd seen the night before had been wearing doctored outfits and homemade hats – attempts to make themselves stand out and look different. If he was lucky, his hat would pass for an example of self-expression and would not be suspected as a coverup.

With a last once-over in the reflector, Obi-Wan left the dwelling and made his way to the shuttle platform. It was mid-morning, and most of the laborers were already at work. The shuttle car was nearly empty.

The city was neatly organized, so it was not difficult to find the schoolspace. Obi-Wan had assumed that the educational buildings would look like all the other buildings on Vorzyd 4, and he was right. Three identical and dull-looking structures stood in a row, housing students of different ages.

As he circled the buildings, Obi-Wan peered into as many classrooms as he could. With the exception of the students' ages,

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they all looked the same. Glazed eyes stared at large screens placed in the front of the rooms. Adults stood by, drilling what could only be work techniques into the students' heads. The institution looked more like a work-training facility than an actual school.

But then, Obi-Wan knew from experience that there were all kinds of schools in the galaxy. He was suddenly reminded of the awful Learning- Circle on the planet Kegan. In spite of the warm day, he shivered at the memory of the "school" where he and Siri, another Padawan, had been imprisoned.

At the School for the Learning, kids were brainwashed to believe things that were not true, and difficult or ill children were locked away – for good. Vorzyd 4 was certainly not the only place where kids were discouraged from developing their own ideas. For the second time that morning Obi-Wan felt grateful that his Master was allowing him the freedom to determine the course of this mission. To try to solve a problem on his own, in his own way. He did not want to let himself or Qui-Gon down, and he felt more determined than ever to make his plan work.

Obi-Wan turned a corner and peered into a small, square portal. Inside was an austere room. Grath and a few other kids from the previous night's meeting were inside, sitting on sleep couches. The room appeared to be an infirmary, but none of the kids inside looked sick.

In fact, they were all sitting up and chatting animatedly.

Obi-Wan stepped closer to the portal, hoping to get a better look and possibly hear what the kids were saying. But just then the door slid open and an adult Vorzydiak entered the room. Right away the kids all lay back, feigning weakness and sleep. The adult looked each student over carefully, standing over Grath for a particularly long time. Then, apparently satisfied, she turned and left the room.

No sooner had the door closed than the kids sat up again and began to talk. One of them jumped to her feet, using hand

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gestures to emphasize her point. Obi-Wan recognized her as the girl who had spotted him outside the meeting the night before.

It looked like the kids were planning something, and Obi-Wan wanted in on it.

Moving away from the portal, Obi-Wan focused on his body temperature. Soon he began to feel warmth tingling through his limbs – he had given himself a fever. A Vorzydiak fever, he hoped.

Making his way around the side of the building, Obi-Wan found the door to the infirmary, opened it, and stepped inside.

"The button!" someone shouted.

"Quick!" yelled another voice.

"The door!"

After a moment of confusion, Obi-Wan understood. The kids wanted him to keep the door open – they obviously couldn't get out from the inside. By pressing a button, Obi-Wan was able to keep the door from closing. The four kids leaped off their sleep couches and charged out into the sun's light.

"What happened to Tray?" Grath asked, turning toward Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan shrugged, hoping it would be enough of a response.

"Well, I'm glad *someone* came to let us out," the hand-gesture girl said. "It was getting hard to convince the medic that we were actually ill."

"Come on," Grath said, looking around. "Let's get out of here before someone sees us."

As the kids ran down a duracrete walkway away from the schoolspace, their conversation continued.

"I think we should try to get more kids out of class next time," one of the kids – a younger boy – said. "Trainer Nalo is so obsessed with his instructuals he would barely notice."

"We can't risk being discovered," a girl replied. Obi-Wan thought she was the shuttle driver from the night before, but wasn't entirely sure.

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By now the group was a fair distance from the schoolspace, and they slowed to a quick Vorzydiak walk.

"This new plan is complicated enough without getting more Freelies involved in implementing it," Grath explained. "We need them to focus on *their* part of the plan – getting the rule-following kids to think differently, too."

Grath stopped and turned toward the boy. "But it's good to keep thinking ahead, Flip," he added.

Grath smiled at the boy, and Flip beamed. He obviously looked up to the Freelite leader.

Grath ran a few steps and spun around, still moving backward. "To work, then?" he called with a smile.

The group erupted into giggles and broke into a run after their leader. Obi-Wan felt a surge of energy as he hurried to catch up.

Chapter Nine

Drab hexagonal buildings whizzed past the windows as Qui-Gon's shuttle made its way back to the city workspace. The view was uninspiring, and Qui-Gon's thoughts drifted back to Obi-Wan.

Qui-Gon had waited outside Port's dwelling and watched his Padawan board the shuttle to the schoolspace. He hadn't meant to spy on the boy, but something had held him there. As he watched Obi-Wan confidently board the shuttle, secure in his skills and his plan, Qui-Gon felt the same pang of emotion he'd felt the night before.

The feeling was new to him, and so unfamiliar that it made him uneasy. He was not sure why he was reluctant to let Obi-Wan take charge of the mission on his own. Was it because he was afraid of losing him, or because he was worried about the boy's safety? "Production Sector seven," a voice droned.

Qui-Gon was startled to hear his stop – and grateful for the announcement. There were no other landmarks to help him find his way back to the Multycorp office he'd visited the day before. Exiting the shuttle behind several other laborers, Qui-Gon cleared his mind. He needed to focus on the mission at hand.

All around him swarms of Vorzydiaks hurried to get to their stations. Qui-Gon wondered how the Vorzydiaks maintained

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their enthusiasm for work. They seemed to be in a great hurry to get to work, almost a frenzy.

Thinking about how he would stall the chairman, Qui-Gon boarded the turbolift for the twenty-fourth floor. But long before he reached the chairman's office he sensed that something was wrong. It suddenly dawned on him that the Vorzydiaks leaving the shuttle were agitated about more than simply getting to work.

The turbolift doors opened on the twenty-fourth floor. As he stepped out, Qui-Gon was met by a disturbing scene – and sound.

A low insectoid drone – much more unnerving than the one he'd heard the evening before – bounced off the walls and filled the room. Laborers rocked back and forth in their chairs like confused children, mumbling to themselves.

Inside the meeting room, Chairman Port circled the large table. His antennae flailed and his eyes looked larger than normal. When Qui-Gon entered, the chairman nearly pounced on him.

"At last," he said, his voice quite a bit higher than usual. "There has been another attack. We must contact Vorzyd 5. Now!"

"In time," Qui-Gon said calmly. "First tell me what has happened."

"It is awful," the chairman said, walking faster and faster around the table. "The worst casualty yet. The central operations computer. It controls the whole grid! It is down. We are all down."

Qui-Gon thought the chairman might burst into tears – or an unintelligible droning buzz. He had to calm down the leader. Without Port's help it would be impossible to keep the rest of the Vorzydiaks from losing it.

Qui-Gon strode to the opposite side of the room and stood in the chairman's path. Port stopped circling.

"First tell me where the central operations computer is," Qui-Gon said firmly. "Then I have work for you to do."

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The chairman looked up at the tall Jedi. Qui-Gon saw something shift on his face, as if he suddenly knew he had to get a hold of himself. But he wasn't sure that the chairman knew how.

"Yes, yes, yes," Chairman Port said. "We must make our way back to work. To work." His antennae seemed to slow a bit.

"The operations computer?" Qui-Gon repeated.

"In the sub-basement. Take the turbolift to level S-one."

Qui-Gon nodded. "Contact the technicians and let them know I am coming. And when you have done that you must assign tasks to the laborers. Contact the managers. Keep everyone busy until the computers are back on-line. It doesn't matter what they do. Just make sure they are safe and busy. It is your *job*." Qui-Gon emphasized this last word.

The chairman nodded. He seemed relieved to have an assignment, and Qui-Gon hoped that simple tasks would calm the other Vorzydiaks as well. But he had no time to wait and see.

Confused laborers flooded the turbolift. Several of them were rocking back and forth. Others were holding their ears. Rather than force his way through the bewildered crowd, Qui-Gon headed for the stairs and started down.

By the time he got to the twenty-third floor Qui-Gon understood why so many of the Vorzydiaks were trying to block out the noise. The computers on the twenty-third floor were emitting high-pitched whines as they turned themselves on and off. He imagined that the sound was much worse for the Vorzydiaks, who had sensitive ears. To him the sound was irritating and chaotic. But he listened carefully long enough to realize that it was not random.

The chaos grew worse the farther Qui-Gon descended. On Assembly eight the machines on the line were also turning on and off and emitting high-pitched tones. The laborers were completely unable to cope. They stood against the walls, twitching, while gooey food product oozed onto the conveyor and then the floor.

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Receiving four was no better. Huge vats that needed to be positioned under the receiving pipes had stalled. Grain was spilling out, making small mountains all over the wing, as well as a slippery hazard for the baffled Vorzydiaks. Several fallen laborers flailed on the floor while others watched in horror, too confused to offer help.

Qui-Gon shook his head. The Vorzydiaks' helplessness when things did not go as planned was extreme. He could not remember when he had last seen such rigid thinking. In the life of a Jedi, things seldom went according to plan. Thinking on your feet was a Jedi necessity.

At last Qui-Gon reached the sub-basement. There were fewer Vorzydiaks on this floor, so Qui-Gon could make out more clearly the intonations of the machines – the tones and rhythms. Stopping for a moment to listen, Qui-Gon almost laughed out loud. He stopped himself when he heard a cry. For the Vorzydiaks this was no laughing matter.

Qui-Gon ran down the duracrete passage to find a female Vorzydiak standing in a large room filled with circuits. Some of them were shorting out, and the poor worker gazed at them in horror, her arms moving jerkily up and down. She clearly did not know what to do.

Qui-Gon would have liked to have calmed the poor woman, but he knew he would be the most help if he could get to central operations. Turning on his heel, he made his way back down the passage.

The tech at the large terminal was madly pushing buttons, but the readout continued to flash. He jumped when he saw Qui-Gon, though it was clear he had been expecting him.

"Nothing is broken," he squealed. "There is no electrical or mechanical failure. It is not logical."

"It is not mechanical failure," Qui-Gon agreed. "But there is a logic to it. Your computer is playing music. It is conducting the machines in this building to play a specific tune."

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"A what?" The tech stopped pushing buttons long enough to stare at Qui-Gon.

"Someone has been playing with your system," Qui-Gon explained. "Your computer is making music."

The tech looked disgusted. "That is just like Vorzyd 5. They like playing games. That is all they do," he snarled. "Playing prevents productivity."

Qui-Gon was silent as he helped the tech find and remove the erroneous command. Once they knew what they were looking for, it did not take long. And once the command was removed, the resonant tones in the building stopped.

There was near silence in the sub-basement when Qui-Gon heard a familiar scream. Leaving the tech, he ran down the hall. The Vorzydiak woman he'd seen earlier was still shrieking, but her arms and feelers were still. She appeared to be paralyzed with fear.

Qui-Gon had thought that the circuits were tied into the computer system. He'd assumed that when the computer problem was resolved, the circuits would stop shorting.

He had been wrong.

Looking closer, Qui-Gon saw that he was standing in front of the circuits for the entire city workspace. This was the grid Port had been talking about. The circuit on the grid that marked this office building was okay. But there had been a chain reaction, and circuits all over the workspace were blowing out in waves. The woman next to him pointed at the next hex of the grid set to go.

"This is the children's hospital," she whimpered. "It cannot lose power."

With nothing to go on but instinct, Qui-Gon raced back to the central operations computer. If he could override the network shutdown and flush the system, he might be able to stop the chain reaction. If he couldn't, this prank would result in more than chaos.

It would result in death.

Chapter Ten

Obi-Wan jogged a few steps behind Grath and the rest of the kids. He was certain that one of the girls, Pel, was the one who had caught him in his "bathrobe" the night before. Fortunately she didn't appear to be suspicious of him now.

The other girl, Nania, had a familiar-sounding voice. She must have been driving the shuttle Obi-Wan had hitched a ride on. But so far nobody had openly recognized him.

Obi-Wan kept waiting for one of them to ask him who he was and why he was following them. But they never did. Grath's initial acceptance of him seemed to be all that was needed. Either that, or the Freelies were such a big group that they were used to not knowing one another.

It didn't matter as long as the students continued to let Obi-Wan tag along. The more time he spent with them, the easier it would be to gain their trust. And the easier it would be to eventually convince them to do the right thing.

Though he longed to know where they were going, Obi-Wan didn't want to risk blowing his cover by asking any questions. It would be better to listen. Unfortunately, nobody was saying much.

About a kilometer away from the school, the small band of Freelies turned in to a refuse facility. Flip and Nania began

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pulling scrap off a huge pile and tossing it aside. Obi-Wan wasn't sure what to do.

Wondering if the next prank involved garbage, he reached over to grab a piece of trash himself. Then Nania pulled a large piece of wreckage off the pile and Obi-Wan spotted something familiar underneath. It was the back of the shuttle he'd ridden last night. Apparently the Freelies kept it stashed here.

"Hop in," Flip said, gesturing to the panel door. The kids piled in. Nania took the pilot's seat and the repulsorlifts roared to life, dislodging debris from the viewscreen.

"Hold on," Nania said over her shoulder. With a lurch and a shudder the small craft broke free of the garbage pile and zoomed out of the facility.

Flip, who obviously hadn't been holding on tight enough, landed in Grath's lap.

"So what do you think they're doing in the Multycorp offices right now?" he asked, grinning at the older boy.

Grath pushed Flip off him with a laugh. "I don't know," he said slyly. "Dancing?"

Obi-Wan didn't get the joke, but he laughed along with the rest of the kids. When the laughter had faded Grath spoke again.

"But they won't be dancing tomorrow. Tomorrow they'll be walking."

Grath sounded serious, and the mood in the shuttle changed. The group was clearly ready to get to the business at hand. Whatever that business was.

There was not much light in the back of the craft, and Obi-Wan had to hang on to keep from being hurled about by Nania's erratic driving. As he braced himself for the next turn he suddenly noticed something he'd missed before. The shuttle's entire hull was lined with small, homemade explosives.

With a final gut-wrenching turn, Nania brought the maintenance shuttle to a stop inside a transport shuttle bay. Grath, Flip, Pel, and Nania grabbed armloads of the explosives

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and piled out of the maintenance craft. Despite his misgivings, Obi-Wan picked up several explosives and followed.

"Pel, Nania, you two cover the east wing. We'll do the west," Grath directed.

Obi-Wan watched uneasily as Grath crawled underneath one of the shuttles with the explosives. He needed to find out what they were doing and he needed to do it now. It looked like Grath and Flip were attaching the explosives to the undersides of the passenger compartments. Were they planning to blow up the crafts with passengers inside?

"So, I forget, when do we trigger these?" Obi-Wan tried to sound casual as he climbed under the shuttle next to Grath and began to fiddle with one of the devices.

Grath gave Obi-Wan a strange look. "Don't worry. Nobody will be hurt. That's one of our rules, remember? We're hiding the explosives so nobody sees them during the evening ride. Then tonight, when the shuttles are back in the bay, we'll trigger them by remote. So tomorrow, when everyone is ready to go to work, well... they won't have their usual transportation, will they?" A smile spread across Grath's face, but Obi-Wan was too concerned with all that could go wrong to smile back. This plan was dangerous, far more dangerous than changing numbers on a datascreen or giving computer systems false commands.

Grath noticed that Obi-Wan wasn't smiling. "Don't worry," he said again more quietly. "We really aren't going to kill anybody. We just want to wake them up."

Obi-Wan forced a smile and a nod. "To work then?" he asked.

"Not tomorrow!" Grath laughed.

Chapter Eleven

Qui-Gon took a deep breath and flipped a switch. The screen in front of him went blank, then blinked back on. Down the hall the shrieking finally stopped. The break had been successful. The circuits stopped shorting, and the children's hospital was safe. But it had been close – too close.

Qui-Gon sighed. He knew the next thing he had to do was to tell Chairman Port about the near disaster, a prospect he did not relish. Perhaps he had been wrong to give Obi-Wan three days. After this latest Freelite prank it was going to be harder than ever to stall the nervous Vorzydiak.

Maybe even impossible, he thought as he made his way back up to the twenty-fourth floor. He was not prepared for what he saw when he walked into the meeting room.

Chairman Port stood before a large projection of a regal-looking Vorzydiak wearing a turban. It was Felana, the leader of Vorzyd 5.

"What is the meaning of this?" Felana demanded. "You dare to accuse Vorzyd 5 of sabotage after you have already insulted us by banishing our ambassadors? I do not understand you, Chairman Port."

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"Here is the J-J-Jedi," Chairman Port stammered. He motioned Qui-Gon to join him in front of the holoprojector. "He knows the truth. He will tell you."

Felana looked even more aghast. "You have called in outside counsel? Do you think this will make your baseless accusations stronger?"

For a moment Qui-Gon was not sure what to do. This was certainly not the way mediation was supposed to work. Chairman Port had put him in an awkward position, and now it would be impossible to establish himself as a neutral party. All he could do, he realized, was try to keep the damage to a minimum.

"Tell her," Chairman Port screeched at the Jedi. "Tell her what she has done to our planet!"

"That is enough!" Felana seethed. "We have been under your thumb for a long time, Chairman. And now you accuse us wrongly. We will not tolerate your accusations."

Qui-Gon put a hand on Chairman Port's shoulder. Using the Force, he calmed the distraught Vorzydiak enough to prevent him from saying anything else he would regret. Then he turned to the image of Felana.

"Please accept the chairman's apologies," Qui-Gon bowed. "Vorzyd 4 has been experiencing some terrorist activity and he meant only to alert you to that fact so that you may be on the lookout for similar activity on your planet."

Qui-Gon could tell by the look on her face that Felana did not believe him. But she was not going to contradict him, either.

"Please tell the chairman that I appreciate his concern and assure him that Vorzyd 5 is prepared to fight," Felana replied in a cool tone. "Vorzyd 5 will not be humiliated. We are not the weak planet in the system any longer. We need only the opportunity to show our strength."

Qui-Gon thanked Felana and ended the transmission. He recognized her last statement for exactly what it was: a threat.

If Vorzyd 4 persisted in accusing Vorzyd 5 of illegal activity, the likely result would be devastating.

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War.

Qui-Gon paced the long hall of the retirement home while he waited for his Padawan. He realized that he could simply summon Obi-Wan on his comlink, but he did not want to destroy the young Jedi's cover or put him in danger. Besides, he needed some time to think about what he was going to say when Obi-Wan did appear.

Qui-Gon reached the end of the hall and turned on his heel. If he did not give Obi-Wan the three days he'd promised, the boy would lose confidence. But things were getting out of hand. If Qui-Gon kept silent...

Suddenly Qui-Gon's thoughts were interrupted by a timid woman's voice. "Excuse me," she said.

With his long strides Qui-Gon had covered the distance of the hallway nearly a dozen times without giving any notice to the one open door. Now he stopped in front of it and gazed at the elderly Vorzydiak woman who beckoned him.

"I am sorry," she said, looking nervously up at Qui-Gon's imposing figure. "You are not a laborer are you? I thought maybe you were a laborer coming to visit. The laborers seem to think life ends when the work is finished. They are too busy to visit. But I heard someone out here and I thought – "

"I would be happy to visit with you," Qui-Gon said gently. Even in his distracted state, his heart went out to this woman.

"Oh, would you? I do not get many visitors. And do not get me wrong – I do not blame them. It is the Vorzyd way."

Qui-Gon followed the woman into her small room and sat across from her on a chair. She did not ask him who he was, but continued to talk, simply enjoying the fact that there was someone there to listen.

"We live to work, you know. Nobody realizes that there is life beyond the work. Nobody knows. Sometimes I wish there was not. The life, I mean. I wish I could die like the others. But there is Tray. Tray still comes. She says things will change. That

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everything will be different. I want to believe her, but they are just children..."

The woman stopped speaking and cocked her head. Outside in the hall Qui-Gon heard boot steps. Obi-Wan.

Qui-Gon excused himself and stepped into the hall. His brief conversation with the retiree had awakened new questions in his mind. There were many things he wanted to ask the woman, but they would have to wait. At the moment he needed to talk to his Padawan.

Chapter Twelve

"The shuttles are set to blow tonight when everyone is sleeping. Grath assured me that no one will be in the shuttle bay." Obi-Wan tried to sound confident as he reported the Freelite prank to his Master. He wanted to mask the unease that he felt. Already he thought that infiltrating the Freelies was taking too long. He wished he'd been able to keep the kids from planting the explosives, but he hadn't seen a way to do it. It was too soon to reveal himself.

Qui-Gon was silent.

"They don't want to hurt anyone," Obi-Wan added.

"Someone will be hurt just the same," Qui-Gon said when he finally spoke. "People were almost hurt today."

Obi-Wan knew that his Master was right. The Freelies *were* going too far and there was more at stake than they realized. All they wanted was to show their parents that they were alive, that they needed more from them than work training. But they were going about it the wrong way.

Now Obi-Wan wondered if his plan to stop them was all wrong, too. Looking at Qui-Gon's face, he could not help but get the feeling that his Master doubted him.

"I fear the pranks have risen to a new level. The children are in over their heads. Today Chairman Port contacted the leader of

Vorzyd 5. She was outraged at his accusations and is prepared to take action if they continue. There was also an attack on the central control computer. If I hadn't been there to help, it could have resulted in a power outage for the entire city. And many lost lives."

Qui-Gon spoke evenly, but Obi-Wan felt reprimanded all the same. Even though he shared his Master's doubts, he found himself railing against them.

"I have two more days," Obi-Wan said with new resolve. "I can do this." Why couldn't Qui-Gon trust him to follow through? Obi-Wan suddenly felt desperate to be allowed to continue his plan. It seemed more important than anything else.

"It's not that I don't trust you," Qui-Gon said, locking eyes with his Padawan.

It never failed to startle Obi-Wan the way Qui-Gon sensed what he was thinking.

"The situation is complicated, and impossible for any single person to control. We must proceed carefully," Qui-Gon finished.

Obi-Wan nodded. He was prepared to defend his plan further, but Qui-Gon had not cut him off as he'd suspected he would. He was being given the freedom to carry on.

Why? Obi-Wan wondered later, lying on his sleep couch. Why was Qui-Gon letting him continue when he obviously had no faith in Obi-Wan's plan? For a moment Obi-Wan thought his Master was giving him room to fail, to teach him a lesson. But that could not be. A Jedi would never risk the lives of other beings simply to prove a point. Qui-Gon hadn't given Obi-Wan the chance to fail, he had given him the chance to succeed.

Lying in the dark, Obi-Wan felt torn. He wasn't at all sure that what he was doing was right. Yet he had no choice but to move forward.

My plan will work, Obi-Wan told himself. It had to.

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The lock on the door clicked and whirred. Obi-Wan was on his feet before he realized he was awake. The door opened to reveal a very rattled Chairman Port.

"The shuttles," the chairman gasped. "Vorzyd 5 is blowing up the shuttles. The morning laborers..." Port's antennae twitched rapidly and the Vorzydiak leaned against the portal for support. He appeared to be in shock. "Wounded," he said in a hollow voice. "Some may not live."

"The shuttles are exploding with passengers on them?" Obi-Wan asked, disbelieving. "When? Where?"

"Everywhere," the chairman whispered. "Now."

"Contact the shuttle bay. Tell them to evacuate. Tell them to stop all shuttles," Qui-Gon commanded.

Chairman Port pulled himself together enough to hurry toward the communication station near the entrance of the building.

Without a word to Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan ran toward the exit. He could hear his Master's footsteps behind him. They needed to keep as many Vorzydiaks as possible from boarding the shuttles.

Outside, a half-full shuttle was just pulling in to pick up the nearly twenty laborers ready to go to work.

"Stop!" Obi-Wan shouted, waving his arms to try to keep the crowd from boarding. But the appearance of the strangely dressed Jedi had the opposite effect, and the group attempted to squeeze onto the shuttle in a panic.

Thinking quickly, Qui-Gon stepped in front of the shuttle to keep it from moving. Obi-Wan understood and dove underneath. With the simple removal of two wires, the explosive was rendered harmless. But this was just one shuttle.

Suddenly Chairman Port's voice echoed over the shuttle system's speakers.

"Evacuate the shuttles at once. Please exit and move away from the shuttles. All shuttle systems will be shut down until further notice."

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Confused Vorzydiaks did as they were told. But some of them started in with their droning, and a few others rocked from side to side. Eventually most of them began to walk the long distance to work.

"We cannot allow this to be blamed on Vorzyd 5," Qui-Gon said quietly behind Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan nodded. Just as Qui-Gon had predicted, the Freelite plan had gone horribly wrong – and so had Obi-Wan's.

"I will find out how extensive the damage is and ask the chairman to have every shuttle in the city inspected," Qui-Gon continued. "You should contact the Freelies. You must convince them to come forward before I am forced to do it for them. We haven't much time."

Obi-Wan nodded again. He had not expected Qui-Gon to let him continue with his infiltration – not after this. He knew his Master had every right to go directly to the chairman and tell him everything. But, he realized, there was reason not to as well. It would be better for all Vorzydiaks if the Freelies came forward in peace. Forcing the kids and adults into a hostile meeting could actually make the situation worse. Qui-Gon had obviously considered this.

Obi-Wan sighed. Whatever the reason, Qui-Gon was giving Obi-Wan one last chance to do it his way. And he was grateful.

But as he watched his Master walk away, Obi-Wan was suddenly overcome by a strange feeling. He had the sense that someone was watching his every move.

Turning quickly, Obi-Wan looked up. High above him, in a window of the retiree complex, Obi-Wan thought he saw a face staring down at him. Then it disappeared.

Chapter Thirteen

Obi-Wan scanned the window for another moment to see if he could catch a glimpse of the person inside. He couldn't. Still thinking about the conversation he'd just had with his Master, he walked toward the Ports' dwelling. It was time to wait for Grath.

It wasn't long before Grath appeared. When the boy had walked some distance ahead, Obi-Wan called out to him and ran to catch up. Even before he got a good look at Grath's face, Obi-Wan could tell that he was upset.

"I don't know how everything went wrong," Grath said shakily. He looked exhausted and his eyes were ringed in red. There was no sign of the charismatic, playful boy Obi-Wan had met the day before.

"There must have been a failure in the remote triggering device. It went off during..." Grath's voice trailed away.

"I know," Obi-Wan said, putting a hand on Grath's shoulder.

Grath swallowed. "I've called an emergency meeting. I just hope nobody notices that so many of us are not in work training, or at work."

Obi-Wan tried to look more optimistic than he felt. It wouldn't do any good to have Grath more worried than he already was. "Let's go," he prompted.

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The meeting was held in the refuse facility. Grath managed to pull himself together, and once again looked like a leader as he stepped up on a pile of rubble to call the meeting to order.

"We have a problem," he began. "The explosives did not go off last night as planned. Instead they exploded during the morning commute."

There was a concerned murmur among the students, but an excited voice rose above the rest. It was Flip.

"And the city is in chaos!" he exclaimed. "We knew we could make a bigger bang if we just put our minds to it and waited until people were paying attention. Now our parents will really have to take notice!"

The group was silent as everyone stared at Flip.

"You did this?" Grath asked the boy. "You tampered with the remote?"

Flip nodded proudly. "Yes!" He looked up at Grath expectantly. It seemed to Obi-Wan that the younger boy was waiting for Grath to shower him with praise. But the Jedi was certain that no praise was coming.

Grath's mouth hung open for a moment before he snapped it closed. His antennae hung low over his forehead and his mouth contorted into a scowl of fury. But his eyes revealed another emotion: guilt.

Obi-Wan was not sure which of Grath's emotions was going to win out. Then Freelines all over the room began talking.

"What are we going to do now?"

"I hope my parents are okay."

"It's about time somebody took some real action."

Obi-Wan turned to see who had made this last remark. But the facility was crowded and it was impossible to tell.

Grath cleared his throat and calmed everyone down – at least for the moment.

"Many people were hurt this morning," he said gravely, "and some may not live. Our mission is to wake people up, make them see what is happening. It is not to kill them." Grath looked

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directly at Flip. "You should not have altered the plan," he said flatly. "It was wrong."

There was a brief moment of silence. Everyone looked at Flip. The boy looked confused, then angry. He glared up at Grath. "It was necessary," he said. "And it was the right thing to do. Now they're *really* paying attention."

The group erupted. Obi-Wan could see a split beginning to develop. Some of the kids felt that Grath was right. Acting peacefully was the only way. Others had had it with the peaceful tactics. They felt violence was a necessary part of revolution.

"The adults will never pay attention to us if we continue to act peacefully," Flip shouted. "What we've been doing so far is not working. Our pranks need to become tactics."

"We don't want to start a war!" someone shouted back. "We're talking about our parents."

"We're talking about adults who ignore us!" yelled another.

Soon everyone was shouting so loudly that Obi-Wan couldn't understand much of what was being said. He could only tell that everyone felt strongly, and that the group was divided. Then a voice rang out over the rest. It was Flip's.

"Only cowards are afraid to stand up and fight for what they need!" he shouted.

This set the Freelies off again. The camaraderie that Obi-Wan had admired in the group completely disappeared. Kids who had worked together peacefully began to shout in one another's faces. Antennae jabbed wildly in aggressive movements. The room was in chaos.

Finally Nania jumped onto a tall pile of rubble. "Stop!" she screamed. The group quieted instantly and turned to look at her. Some of the kids looked annoyed by the interruption, but nobody said anything.

"This fighting is useless," Nania said. "We need to work together or we will accomplish nothing. Let's report to our work training spaces before we are missed. Then tonight we can meet as planned."

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Some of the Freelies grumbled aloud, but the group slowly made its way out of the facility. There was little discussion, and Obi-Wan could feel the tension in the air.

He could also feel the knot in his stomach. The division in the group was not a good sign. If the Freelies wanted to be taken seriously, they would have to come forward peacefully and talk to the adults as a cohesive group. It looked like the chances of that were getting slimmer by the minute.

Obi-Wan decided to find Grath and see what he was thinking. He circled a pile of rubble near where he had last seen him, but instead spotted Flip and a dark-haired girl he didn't recognize.

The two were clearly deep in conversation, and Obi-Wan tried to look casual as he tuned in to what they were saying.

"It's not enough," the girl said. "Grath is on their side."

He saw Flip nod slowly, and the girl leaned in closer. She spoke almost in a whisper.

"We have no choice but to take action on our own," she said. "And soon."

Obi-Wan took a step closer to the two Freelies. He wanted to hear every word. But his movement caught their attention, and they immediately split up. It was obvious they didn't want to be overheard. But he couldn't tell if they knew he'd been listening in.

Obi-Wan's mind reeled. He needed some time to clear his head. Exiting the refuse facility, he watched groups of kids make their way toward the work training space. He knew instinctively that work training was not a good place for him to think things through. So he turned in the other direction, heading toward the home-space.

Walking along, Obi-Wan now noticed the adult laborers who were still making their way to work. Some walked in pairs, talking. Others ambled along, gazing at the sky. None of them seemed desperate to get to work. And there was no audible droning. It was almost as if being forced out of their work environment gave them a new perspective.

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Perhaps the adults are ready for change, Obi-Wan thought. He felt a small surge of hope. If he and Qui-Gon could just bring the kids and adults together, Vorzyd 4 might have a chance.

Chapter Fourteen

"Vorzyd 5 must pay," Chairman Port said as he and Qui-Gon entered the Multycorp offices. "We shall contact them immediately."

Qui-Gon exhaled slowly. Although he'd expected the chairman to react in this way, he had not yet come up with a plan to stop the communication from going through.

He again questioned the wisdom of his decision to let Obi-Wan infiltrate the Freelies. He'd wanted to empower his Padawan. And he believed that Vorzyd 4 would have the best chance at a peaceful resolution if the kids came forward on their own. Unfortunately, that belief was of no help to him at the moment.

Time to think on your feet, he told himself wryly.

"I think it would be better to wait until we have the results from the shuttle inspection," Qui-Gon said rationally. Chairman Port had ordered an investigation of all the shuttles in the city, and they were waiting for the report. "The more information we have, the better."

"They are to blame!" Chairman Port railed. "They need to be punished! "

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"Do we, now?" came a voice from behind them. Qui-Gon turned and saw Felana standing in the doorway. Two large Vorzydiaks flanked her on either side.

Chairman Port's face had lost all traces of anger. His expression was now a combination of confusion and fear. His large eyes were even wider than usual and his antennae twitched uncontrollably. It was obvious that he was not accustomed to unexpected political visitors – especially hostile ones.

"What are you – "

"I have come to set the record straight once and for all, Chairman," Felana said, striding into the room. She was remarkably tall for a Vorzydiak, and her upright stance made her even more so.

The chairman blinked in surprise. Qui-Gon sensed that he wanted to know how she had gotten all the way into his office without being noticed and stopped. He imagined that it probably wasn't too difficult in the chaotic aftermath of the shuttle explosions.

There were several long moments of awkward silence. Then Chairman Port straightened his jumpsuit and cleared his throat loudly. His expression shifted to one of self-righteous indignation.

"You have been sabotaging our production capabilities," he said evenly. "You resent our productivity. You wish to appear stronger to the rest of the Vorzyd system. Our computers and assembly lines are malfunctioning. It is the only explanation."

"Explanations are not my concern," Felana replied. "Your baseless accusations are. And we do not resent your productivity," she added, her eyes glinting. "On the contrary, we find your work customs to be rather tedious."

If it were not for the seriousness of the situation, Qui-Gon would have smiled at Felana's remark. The Vorzydiak kids obviously found the work customs to be tiresome as well.

"You see?" Chairman Port said, turning to Qui-Gon. "They resent us."

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Qui-Gon was silent. Part of him wanted to tell Chairman Port everything. But his gut told him that this meeting was not going to bring about any kind of immediate or violent action. And he still hoped that the Freelies would come forward on their own. Besides, he had promised his Padawan that he would wait. If all went well, there would be a meeting of the minds – between those truly involved and responsible – very soon.

"We did not resent you," Felana insisted. "Until you began to accuse us of crimes we did not commit." She glared at Chairman Port. "I want all of these baseless lies to stop at once, or we will be taking action against you in response."

Chairman Port's antennae began to twitch again. "What kind of action?" he asked nervously.

Felana leveled her gaze at the Vorzyd 4 leader. "A kind much worse than the sabotage you've wrongly accused us of."

Chapter Fifteen

That night, Obi-Wan met up with Grath on the shuttle platform. He looked tired, but his eyes were clear. Obi-Wan sensed that the boy had found a new sense of direction.

"Some of the adults looked content as they made their way to work today," Obi-Wan told him. "I think they enjoyed their time off."

Grath nodded. "It can work without violence," he said confidently. "People just need a little time to see how it could be."

Obi-Wan was glad to see Grath back to his old self. He didn't want to dampen his spirits by telling him about the conversation he'd overheard between Flip and the dark-haired girl. But he couldn't keep that kind of information to himself, either.

"I overheard – "

Obi-Wan was cut short by the shuttle pulling up to the platform. Nania was driving, and she greeted Obi-Wan with a smile. Obi-Wan was grateful as he took a comfortable seat. A ride inside Nania's shuttle could be a nail-biter, but it was better than clinging to the outside of the craft.

When they arrived at the usual office building meeting place, Obi-Wan spotted Flip right away. He was standing in a corner next to the same dark-haired girl, scowling.

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Grath walked right up to them. "Hi, Flip," he said in a friendly voice.

Flip didn't say anything, and his scowl deepened. It was clear that he was still angry about the reprimand he'd received earlier in the day. The girl next to him was silent as well. Watching them, Obi-Wan suddenly realized that he'd seen the girl before, away from the Freelines. She'd been visiting her grandmother at the retiree complex the first night he'd been on the planet. But she seemed totally different now – there was no trace of the warm, affectionate young girl he'd enjoyed watching and listening to.

Grath stood in front of Flip for a moment, trying to get the boy to soften. When it was clear that he wouldn't, the leader's focus shifted to the meeting at hand. He stood up on one of the desks and called everyone's attention.

"If we can show the laborers that there is more to life than productivity without hurting them, they will help us," he said calmly.

"The laborers are too far gone," the dark-haired girl replied hotly. "Fear is the only thing that will keep them from stopping us."

Grath frowned. "That's not true, Tray," he said. "And you know it."

It didn't take long for the disagreement and anger from the earlier meeting to overtake the group. Everyone shouted to be heard. Antennae twitched and stabbed the air, punctuating shouts. Hands were balled into fists. The two groups began to separate – Grath and his followers on one side of the office and Flip and his on the other.

"We need to make ourselves known," someone yelled. "The laborers have no idea that we're pulling the pranks. They don't even think we're capable. "

"We're not getting any credit," a different voice called out.

"Or blame," someone on the other side shouted.

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The shouts were getting louder and louder. It was almost impossible to hear what was being said. Obi-Wan looked from one side of the room to the other, not sure what to do. He felt that some action was necessary, but he didn't want to blow his cover.

Suddenly the lights outside the office blinked on. Voices echoed outside, and footsteps thundered up the stairs.

Grath looked up, alarmed. The kids were suddenly silent.

The Freelies had been discovered.

Chapter Sixteen

The footsteps and voices got louder as they came closer. The Freelies began to look worriedly at one another, their antennae twitching in fear.

Out of the corner of his eye, Obi-Wan saw Flip toss a small capsule to the ground. A thick, green smoke immediately began to billow into the room. Interestingly, the smoke did not seem to irritate the Freelies' lungs. There was no coughing or sputtering among the group.

"This way," Flip said calmly. He led the kids out of the office through a secret exit, down a tunnel, and up several flights of stairs. When they emerged through a heavy durasteel doorway, they were standing on the roof of a neighboring workspace building. It was dark, but the stars in the sky gave off a dim light.

All was quiet below. The kids were safe.

No sooner were the Freelies on the roof than Flip turned toward Obi-Wan. "There's something you don't know!" he shouted to the group. "Grath has been keeping it from you. This boy has been sent here to stop us. He is a Jedi – and a traitor!"

There was an audible gasp as the Freelies gaped at Obi-Wan. For a moment Obi-Wan sensed that the group wasn't sure this was the truth – and thought he might be safe.

The moment passed quickly.

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"It's true!" the dark-haired girl shouted. "I've seen him at the retirement complex. My grandmother is there, and he was spying on us!"

"Yes, Tray, he is a Jedi." Grath lowered his head in defeat.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes for a moment. He'd had no idea that Grath knew he was a Jedi. Taking a deep breath, he tried to gather strength. He was not looking forward to what was coming. Someone pulled at his hood, exposing his antennae-less head.

"Traitor!" someone shouted.

"Grath is a liar, not a leader!" Flip yelled.

"What kind of leader doesn't trust his team enough to tell them the simple truth?" came a quieter voice.

Kids on both sides of the violence issue were coming out against Grath and Obi-Wan. Only a few stood by Grath.

"Grath has to make difficult decisions for all of us," Nania said reasonably. "We may not like each and every one, but he makes them for the good of the group. He has never led us astray."

"The Jedi should still leave us," Tray spoke out. "Immediately."

There was silence as the group nodded – almost unanimously. Only Grath's head remained still.

Obi-Wan looked to Grath for support, hoping he would say something to the group. Grath looked distraught, but he kept quiet.

Obi-Wan felt defeated, but knew he could not just walk away.

"Peace is the only way to true victory," he told the Freelies. "If you continue down this path you'll build a permanent wall between yourselves and the workers. There will be no chance for dialogue, or a new way of life." Obi-Wan looked beseechingly at the group, his eyes moving from one face to another. None of their expressions had changed. There was no way for him to convince them.

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Obi-Wan dropped his head and turned toward the stairs. The last thing he saw before the door slid closed behind him was the smiles on Tray's and Flip's faces.

Obi-Wan's mind was spinning as he left the rooftop. He felt like a fool. Why didn't he suspect that Grath knew he was a Jedi all along? The infiltration had been too easy, he now realized. Obi-Wan felt ashamed for not figuring it out earlier. He had wanted his plan to work so badly that he assumed everything was going just fine. Only it wasn't.

Obi-Wan made his way through the streets to the homespace. In the back of his mind was a voice that reminded him that he hadn't been entirely honest with the Freemies, either. He hadn't told them he was a Jedi.

But I was acting for the good of the planet, he told himself. I was trying to bring everyone to a peaceful solution.

This all felt much like the situation on Melida/ Daan, Obi-Wan realized. When Obi-Wan had joined the Young, he was certain that he was doing the right thing. But in the end he was not sure that the Young were on the right path. And it had not taken him long to know that leaving the Jedi order was not the right path for him.

At first glance, the situation here on Vorzyd 4 seemed totally different from the one on Melida/Daan. Harmless, really. But now Obi-Wan could not see many differences. And the similarities were screaming in his ears.

The arguing Freemies. The explosions. The inability of the generations to talk openly together.

Worst of all, Obi-Wan knew, he was no longer in a position to help. The kids didn't trust him. And why should the adults believe someone who had been keeping secrets from them all along?

Not sure what else to do, Obi-Wan headed back to his room at the retirement complex. He had not been there long when Qui-Gon arrived.

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Obi-Wan knew his Master was concerned about him – and probably the situation as well. With a sigh, he began to tell him all that had happened.

"Someone must have tipped off the adults," Obi-Wan began.

Qui-Gon nodded. "I did not say anything, as I promised I would not," he said. "But I did overhear the building maintenance team reporting a disturbance to Chairman Port. They were acting on a tip."

Obi-Wan had not suspected that Qui-Gon was responsible for the intrusion, but was glad to hear his Master confirm that he was not.

"A group of adults stormed the secret meeting," Obi-Wan said. "But one of the kids, Flip, dropped a smoke capsule and led everyone to safety."

"He was well prepared for just such an invasion," Qui-Gon said pointedly.

Obi-Wan nodded. "I thought that at the time," he said. "Perhaps *he* was the informer. It seemed too simple. But much more has happened since then...."

Obi-Wan trailed off. It was getting difficult to look his Master in the eye. He felt responsible for the state of the situation between the kids and adults. Once again he had the feeling that his instincts had been all wrong.

"Go on," Qui-Gon said gently. His eyes were full of empathy. But somehow that didn't make Obi-Wan feel any better. In fact, it made him feel worse. He didn't deserve understanding right now. Things on Vorzyd 4 were worse than when they'd arrived.

And it was all his fault.

Chapter Seventeen

Qui-Gon could see that his Padawan was struggling. He was tempted to push him further to see if he would open up, but knew that was not the right choice. What Obi-Wan needed was a bit of time, just as Qui-Gon himself did on occasion.

The room in the retirement complex was quiet for several minutes. Then Qui-Gon spoke.

"I think we should go outside and spar," he said. "It has been too long since we did lightsaber training together."

Qui-Gon was hoping that the physical activity would help his Padawan release some tension – and piece things together in his mind. Regardless, focusing on something entirely different would be a good change of pace.

Obi-Wan seemed reluctant as they exited the building. But once he was outside and facing his Master, his eyes flashed with an intensity that surprised Qui-Gon. The young Jedi ignited his lightsaber, and Qui-Gon did the same.

The two Jedi circled each other slowly with their lightsabers raised, as if in a dance. Obi-Wan moved gracefully, his eyes locked on Qui-Gon's. It was as if he were challenging him to do something, to make the first move.

Qui-Gon did. He brought his lightsaber down in a powerful strike – once, twice, three times. Obi-Wan was there to block

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each blow. The graceful arcs he made with his blade were confident and accurate. His eyes never left his Master's face.

Qui-Gon suddenly realized that his Padawan's lightsaber skills had improved significantly in the past months. His physical energy was exceptional – young and true. Obi-Wan was fighting like a Jedi Knight.

Not to mention trusting his instincts, Qui-Gon thought wryly. He suddenly had the feeling that one day the boy would beat him. And that such a day might not be so far away.

The two Jedi dodged and weaved with incredible speed, their ignited blue and green blades blurs of energy in the Vorzyd night. But behind them pulsed something even stronger-Jedi will. Obi-Wan wanted to be treated as an equal, Qui-Gon knew. But while he had grown up a lot in the last four years, he was only seventeen. He still had much to learn.

With each stroke, Qui-Gon pushed Obi-Wan farther back. It was not terribly difficult. But even as he advanced on his Padawan, Qui-Gon had the feeling that Obi-Wan was allowing him to do it – that the Padawan was somehow in control.

He was. In a flash of blinding green light Obi-Wan swung, ducked, and turned. His blue eyes flashed and a small smile turned up the corners of his lips. He now had the upper hand.

Qui-Gon was accustomed to this kind of haughty strategy coming from an enemy. But it was slightly unnerving to see it in his own Padawan learner. And yet it had worked.

As if picking up on his Master's thoughts, Obi-Wan stepped up the pace an additional notch. Now he was swinging repeatedly and with phenomenal strength, pushing Qui-Gon in a wide arc around the courtyard. His green blade was a bright blur in the darkness, and his entire body moved with certainty and empowerment.

Qui-Gon had to concentrate – hard – to keep ahead of his Padawan. They had fought side by side often enough for him to be able to guess what Obi-Wan would do next. Of course, the same was true of Obi-Wan. And once in a while the young Jedi

blocked a blow so quickly that Qui-Gon knew the boy had known exactly what was coming.

With a flash and a buzz, the lightsabers met in a raised cross. Both men were breathless, sweating from the exertion. This had been no lighthearted spar.

Obi-Wan looked up at his Master, his eyes bright and intense. It was clear that he had not actually won the match, but that he had stated his case firmly. Something had changed between them. Obi-Wan had taken yet another step toward becoming a Jedi Knight, and Qui-Gon was closer than ever to letting him go.

Without speaking, the two Jedi switched off their lightsabers and headed back into the retirement complex.

"You must go to Grath," Qui-Gon said quietly. "The students and the laborers have much to teach one another."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I agree," he said. "As you have had much to teach me. I am grateful, Master."

Qui-Gon felt a surge of pride. Obi-Wan was a good man, and would be a great Jedi Knight. "We learn from each other, Padawan," he said. "But thank you."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I think I should find Grath immediately," he said. "I see now that there is still a chance for us to stop the dispute, to get the two sides to listen to each other. But we do not have much time. I think that deep down, the students and the adults want the same thing."

"Yes, deep down," Qui-Gon agreed.

Chapter Eighteen

Obi-Wan slept soundly through the night and awoke with a clear head. He knew exactly what needed to be done, and was prepared to do it.

After donning his Jedi robes, he left the retirement complex, walked over to the Ports' homespace, and knocked on the door. It seemed as though Grath were standing right on the other side, because the door slid open immediately. Obi-Wan was surprised to see Nania behind him.

"We were just getting ready to come look for you," Grath explained. He looked a bit sheepish. "I'm glad you've come."

Grath stepped aside and Obi-Wan entered the dwelling. Nania led them all to the table.

"I'm so sorry, Obi-Wan," Grath said as soon as they were sitting down. "I knew you were a Jedi because I overheard my father. I should have told you. But I thought you might not want to help if you knew I knew. Or that your Master would not let you. And I didn't think that all of the Freelies would accept help from a Jedi."

Grath spoke quickly and clearly, and his words felt genuine. Obi-Wan could see why he was the leader of the Freelies.

"I deceived you as well," Obi-Wan admitted. "I knew that it was dishonest not to tell you that I was a Jedi. But I felt it was

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the best way to learn what was happening on your planet, and how to help."

Grath's eyes lit up. "I know," he said. "And I think you *can* help. We need to get through to our parents. They are not our enemy. You have seen firsthand what our relationships are like. They are crumbling. We need to rebuild the foundations. You might have the power to help facilitate that."

"Both sides could be a problem at this point," Nania added. "The adults suspect that we have been pulling the pranks, so they may be hostile. Especially because they've been accusing Vorzyd 5. We've caused a lot of trouble. And now the Freelies are divided."

"I did not tip off the adults," Obi-Wan said earnestly. He wanted Grath and Nania to know he would not betray them in such a way.

"We know that," Grath said.

"It was Flip," Nania added. "I overheard him and Tray laughing about how easy it was to fool the rest of the group." She reached over and put a hand on Obi-Wan's arm. "We know you've only been trying to help us, Obi-Wan," she said. "That's your job as a Jedi, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it is," Obi-Wan said.

"But things keep getting worse and worse," Grath said, suddenly looking a bit defeated. "We used to do this just for fun," he said. "You know, for something to do."

"It went on like that for a while, and it was okay," Nania said. "We were having fun. We worked hard together doing the planning and carrying out the pranks. And nobody got hurt."

"But then we changed the rules," Grath continued. "We wanted to wake up the laborers – our parents and grandparents. Then my father began to accuse Vorzyd 5." His voice suddenly held a tinge of bitterness. "We started to interfere with productivity, because that was all they seemed to care about. We just wanted to be noticed...."

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Grath's voice trailed off and his eyes fell to the floor. "We're not so sure about the pranks anymore," he admitted. "We never intended for those explosives to go off when laborers were in the shuttles. We never meant for anyone to get hurt."

"Now we want to stop what we have in the works," Nania continued. "But we're not sure we can convince Flip and the Freelines on his side to call it off – that violence isn't the way."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "This next prank would be violent?" he asked.

"It's not actually supposed to be," Grath replied. "But it was going to be explosive. And with the way things have been going..."

His voice trailed off once more. But this time he looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know what's happened to Flip," he said mournfully. "He used to be such a great person. A real friend. I always thought he looked up to me."

"He did," Nania said. "But Flip is his own person. You can't blame yourself for his thoughts and actions."

Obi-Wan's heart went out to Grath. He knew what it was like to feel responsible – he had felt that way so many times. When his friends were in danger. When his rivals had died.

"I'll bet he still looks up to you," Obi-Wan said, remembering how hurt Flip had seemed when Grath came down on him for setting off the explosive devices during the morning commute. "I think his anger might be a mask for his hurt. He wants you to be proud of him."

"I am proud of him," Grath said. "In a way. I just think his energy is misdirected."

"It's important for you to move forward and make the right decisions. For everybody-including Flip," Obi-Wan counseled. "It's time to meet with the adults, to tell them what is going on. You need to confide in them."

Grath let out his breath slowly. "I know," he said. "But I don't know where to begin."

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"I can set up the meeting for you," Obi-Wan said. "And Qui-Gon will help counsel the laborers."

Grath sighed. "Okay," he said. "But I have a feeling that talking to the laborers might be easier than convincing the Freelies to call off the latest prank and to show up at the meeting."

Chapter Nineteen

That evening, over a Vorzyd supper of tasteless broth and a tough flatbread, Obi-Wan told his Master of his meeting with Grath and Nania.

"I really think we can turn the situation into a positive one," he said confidently. "The Freelies have to see that meeting with the laborers is the right thing to do. It's the best thing for everybody."

"I agree, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "And I think I should accompany you to this Freelite meeting. There is much at stake."

Obi-Wan could not help but feel chided. Didn't his Master think he could handle the situation? Wasn't it clear that he was approaching the problem in a new way?

Obi-Wan swallowed his utensilful of broth and looked across the table at his Master. "I would like to go alone," he said slowly. "To finish what I have started by myself. We will both be at the meeting between the Freelies and the laborers, of course." Obi-Wan hoped this last comment might sway his Master a bit.

There was a moment of silence before Qui-Gon spoke. "Very well," he said. "I understand that it could be important for you to go alone. My presence might upset the balance you have been trying to create. I will contact Chairman Port and make sure the laborers are ready to meet. I will need to be present when he

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contacts Vorzyd 5 to apologize. And I may know a few others who would be interested in coming to the Freelite/laborer meeting as well," he added thoughtfully.

Obi-Wan wondered who his Master was talking about, but a knock on their retiree room door halted their conversation. A second later the metal portal slid open and Grath stood in the doorway. He looked sheepishly at Qui-Gon, as if he wasn't sure how to greet a Jedi Master.

Qui-Gon got to his feet and lowered his head slightly before Grath.

"It's an honor to meet the leader of the Free-lies," Qui-Gon said.

Grath looked surprised, but Obi-Wan just smiled. His Master was exceptionally skilled at setting others at ease.

"Obi-Wan has told me much about you," Qui-Gon continued with a friendly smile.

Grath smiled back. "It's an honor to meet you as well," he said. "And I'd like to thank you for your help. I'm hoping Vorzyd 4 will be on a new path before you leave."

"That is my wish as well," Qui-Gon agreed as he began to clear the eating utensils from the table. Obi-Wan sensed that it was his way of not intruding on their departure. Silently grateful, Obi-Wan left the room with Grath.

The two crossed the courtyard and waited for Nania to pick them up in the shuttle. In spite of his apparent confidence back in the retirement complex, Obi-Wan felt quite nervous. What if the Freelies wouldn't listen to what he and Grath had to say? What if they still thought he was a traitor?

By the time they got to the refuse facility, Obi-Wan was practicing a calming breathing technique. But he did not have to worry. The Freelies were quiet as they heard Grath out.

"I must apologize to you all for not telling you that we had a Jedi among us," Grath said from atop a heap of rubble. "But at the time I thought I was doing the right thing."

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While he listened to Grath, Obi-Wan looked around the facility. Kids were listening intently, and many were nodding. Only Tray stood apart, alone in a corner, looking angry. There was no sign of Flip.

"Obi-Wan has come to help us," Grath went on. "He understands what we are trying to do. And he can bring us and the laborers together."

"No!" Tray shouted, stamping her foot. Looking at her, Obi-Wan wondered why she was so bent on violence. What did she want to accomplish?

There was a murmur in the crowd, and kids began to speak. But they were much more orderly than they had been the previous day, taking turns and listening to what others were saying. Obi-Wan took this as a good sign.

"They don't care about us," someone said. "It's all about productivity."

"And they won't listen," another Freelite added. "They'll just stop the pranks, and the pranks are..." The boy struggled to find the right words.

"I agree," Grath interrupted. "Our coming together to make the pranks happen is the only fun I've had, and could be the best thing I've ever done. But we are not solving the problem. We are not getting any closer to our parents. We have to start somewhere if we are going to bring about the changes we need."

There was a moment of silence as the Free-lies looked at one another. Obi-Wan noticed that Tray's antennae were jabbing at the air, as if fighting something invisible. But the others seemed to be getting what Grath was saying. They understood that violence wasn't the answer.

"You do not have to come to the meeting if you are opposed," Nania said, looking directly at Tray. "But we hope you will. It is for all of us. It is the only way."

Nania kept her eyes locked on Tray, as if she expected an argument. But the girl remained sullen and silent. Then Nania's antennae straightened.

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"Where is Flip?" she asked.

Tray shrugged. "I do not know," she said. But there was a glint in her eyes that made Obi-Wan suspect she wasn't telling the truth.

Obi-Wan switched on his comlink. It was time to contact Qui-Gon. The device crackled for a moment, and then he heard his Master's voice.

"The Freelies have agreed to meet," Obi-Wan said.

"That is good news," Qui-Gon replied. "We are in the Multycorp annex next to Chairman Port's office. We have made peace with Vorzyd 5, and a large group of laborers has gathered here, along with some retirees. We are anxious to get started."

"Excellent," Obi-Wan said. For the first time in days he felt relieved, and truly hopeful. "We are on our way."

Obi-Wan ended the communication and climbed onto a small pile of rubble. "The laborers are waiting to meet with us – to hear what we have to say," he told the Freelies. "Some of the retirees are there as well. They want to begin the dialogue. We should all head over to the Multycorp annex at once."

There was audible excitement as the Freelies began to chatter among themselves. Antennae all over the room were bouncing up and down. Obi-Wan turned to look for Tray, and saw her sink to the ground. A look of horror was frozen on her face.

"But my grandmother – " she stammered. "No." She looked up at Grath and Obi-Wan. "The Multycorp annex is going to explode."

Chapter Twenty

The Freelies grew completely silent as Tray's words sank in.

"What?" Grath said. "What did you say?"

Tray's eyes were full of tears. "The Multycorp annex is going to explode," she repeated. "We thought it would be empty. There were no meetings on the roster."

Obi-Wan reached for his comlink. If he could tell Qui-Gon what was happening, they might be able to stop the explosion. But before he could even attempt to make a transmission Tray was shaking her head.

Obi-Wan tried the comlink, but there was only interference and static.

"It won't work anymore," she said woodenly. "We've scrambled communication." She pointed to her timepiece. "We're too late."

Tray leaped to her feet. "We have to stop the explosion!" she shouted. "Come on!"

Leading the way, Tray rushed out to the maintenance shuttle and climbed into the cockpit seat. For a moment, Nania looked as though she might try to take the controls from her, but she changed her mind. Tray needed something to do.

Unfortunately, Tray was not much of a pilot. If a ride with Nania was an adventure, a ride with Tray was a hazard. The

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shuttle lurched and bounced, tossing the other Freelies around in the back.

As he slammed into his seat, Obi-Wan tried to clear his mind. He wanted to send Qui-Gon a warning about the explosion. But there was so much anxiety and commotion in the shuttle it was difficult to concentrate. He closed his eyes and shut out all of the noise and emotion. Gathering the Force around him, he sent a warning to Qui-Gon. *Get everyone out of the Multycorp annex*, he told him. Now.

Obi-Wan opened his eyes to find Grath staring at him. "I hope whatever you just did works," the boy said in a shaky voice. "If anything happens to my father because of me, because of what I've done...." he trailed off, suddenly at a loss for words.

Obi-Wan tried to reassure Grath. "We're doing all we can. We mustn't lose hope," he said.

But Obi-Wan himself had a foreboding feeling. They might be too late.

"It's all my fault," Grath went on. "I started to change the pranks. I wanted to get their attention. To make them see..." Grath's eyes filled with tears as he stared out of the shuttle portal. "And now my father, the leader of the planet, is in danger."

"It's not your fault, Grath," Tray piped up, her voice wavering. "It's mine." She made a sharp turn and the shuttle banked to the left. There was a groan from a few Freelies who were thrown against the shuttle wall.

"I convinced Flip that the pranks should become violent. I told him you would respect him for taking the next step, that you would be proud...." Tray took a hand off the controls to wipe her eyes, sending the shuttle into a nosedive. It skidded against the ground before Tray righted it again.

"And he believed me," she said with a sob. "He believed every word I said."

Finally the shuttle rounded a corner and the Multycorp annex came into view. Obi-Wan let out a huge sigh of relief. It was still standing.

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But before the shuttle got close enough for anyone to shout a warning, a huge explosion rocked the workspace. Chunks of metal, cement, and other debris shot into the air as the front of the Multycorp annex exploded, collapsing in on itself.

"No!" Grath screamed, covering his face with his hands. Nania stared ahead, too shocked to speak. Tray slumped over the shuttle's controls. Obi-Wan scanned the area through the view-screen, waiting for the dust to clear. Did Qui-Gon get his message? Did the Vorzydiaks get out in time? Obi-Wan sensed that his Master was nearby, but could not tell if he was all right.

Obi-Wan immediately saw a group of people. Some were crouched, others lay on the ground amid the rubble. There was not much movement.

Forcing open the shuttle door, Obi-Wan raced toward them. He desperately hoped that he was not running toward a scene of death.

Chapter Twenty-One

The explosion site was in chaos. Vorzydiak laborers and retirees were everywhere, lying on the ground, droning, and nursing injuries. All of them were in shock. Obi-Wan followed Grath and Tray as the Vorzydiaks searched the crowd for their families.

At last Obi-Wan spotted Qui-Gon's brown robe. His Master was kneeling beside a body on the ground. Next to him was Chairman Port.

"Father!" Grath shouted and sprinted ahead.

Chairman Port turned. His face was singed. With one hand he protected the injured arm that hung awkwardly at his side. Being careful not to hurt his broken arm, Grath stepped close to his father. They did not speak but instead embraced using their antennae, letting their feelers entwine, assuring each other that they were going to be all right.

Obi-Wan hurried toward Qui-Gon. He was relieved to see his Master was not injured, but the Jedi did not embrace. The look on Qui-Gon's face stopped Obi-Wan in his tracks. Tray's grandmother was the figure on the ground. Her eyes were closed and there was blood on her face.

Tray dropped to her knees beside her grandmother, unable to speak.

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"She's going to be fine," Qui-Gon said softly. "She was hit on the head by a small piece of falling debris on her way out of the building."

The old woman's eyes fluttered open and she reached out for her granddaughter. Tray took her hand, but her face remained a mask of horror. Obi-Wan knew she was blaming herself.

Qui-Gon put his hand on Tray's shoulder. "Your grandmother is a brave woman."

Tray looked gratefully at Qui-Gon through tear-filled eyes. He returned her gaze reassuringly before turning to Obi-Wan.

"Thanks to your warning almost everyone was able to get out of the building in time."

"Almost everyone?" Obi-Wan asked. Qui-Gon did not need to say anything else. Obi-Wan knew who had been left inside. "Flip," he said quietly, not wanting to upset Tray further. But she overheard.

"No!" Tray sobbed. "No, not Flip. We've got to find him. We've got to get him out."

Obi-Wan nodded solemnly. Of course they needed to find Flip. He only hoped they would find him alive.

Grath shouted and waved the growing group of Freelies to the corner of what had been the front of the Multycorp annex.

"There's a sound coming from the basement," he explained. "We have to get in there."

The team of laborers had searched the rubble for only a few minutes before they first heard the soft pinging. It could have been a piece of machinery still trying to operate. It could have been a wild creature. Or it could have been Flip.

A dozen large laborers gathered together and pushed with all of their strength on a heavy beam that blocked access to the basement level. It didn't move.

"Lift together," Grath shouted. "On three."

Several of the laborers looked skeptically at the young Freelies. But they made room for them around the beam.

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"One, two, three," Grath counted. Working together, the group lifted the beam, easily sliding it over until they'd created an opening about a meter wide.

"Brace the side," Grath shouted.

The opening wasn't much, but it was big enough for Obi-Wan to squeeze through. "Hurry, Obi-Wan," Grath urged as the young

Jedi began to lower himself into the darkened basement. He didn't need to ask twice. Obi-Wan knew that the remains of the Multycorp annex were unstable at best. Even with the beam braced over the entrance, the chance of a collapse was great. And if Flip was still alive his time could be limited.

Obi-Wan paused a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. He listened for the ping. It seemed to be coming from a spot ahead of him and to the left. It was getting less frequent.

Suddenly dirt and pebbles poured down onto Obi-Wan's head.

"Look out," called a voice above him. "I'm coming with you."

The light from the opening was blocked for a moment. Then Tray dropped down beside Obi-Wan.

"The noise is coming from over there," Obi-Wan pointed. He started to lead the way but Tray rushed past him.

"Flip?" she yelled. "Flip? Hang on, we're coming." The Vorzydiak girl ducked around a large piece of machinery. She moved quickly and easily in the cramped quarters and disappeared from view. But Obi-Wan could still hear her calling to her friend.

"Flip? Flip!" Tray's exclamation left no doubt that she had found the boy. Obi-Wan pushed past a pile of rubble to join them.

"Flip," Tray repeated more quietly. Together Obi-Wan and Tray heaved the piece of durasteel bracing that pinned Flip to the floor off his chest. Dropping down beside him, Tray took the

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boy's hand. She loosened his grip on the scrap of durasteel he'd been pounding on the brace as a distress signal.

Except for a large bruise on his forehead, Flip appeared to be okay. But even though the brace was no longer holding him down, he couldn't get up. Watching him struggle to get enough air to speak, Obi-Wan realized that he was in bad shape. Flip coughed and winced in pain.

"Lie down," Obi-Wan instructed. "Don't try to move or speak. Then he turned to Tray. "Stay with him while I get the medics."

As Obi-Wan made his way back to the basement opening he heard Tray speaking softly.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. A sob caught in her throat. "I was wrong."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tray stood as close as she could to the gravstretcher as Flip was slowly maneuvered out of the basement. Grath fidgeted nervously as they emerged. It was obvious to Qui-Gon that the boy wanted to talk to Flip, but that something was holding him back.

Qui-Gon glanced at his Padawan, mentally urging him to coax Grath forward. But Obi-Wan was already approaching the Freelite leader. Qui-Gon could not hear what Obi-Wan spoke into Grath's ear, but whatever it was gave him the courage to take a few steps toward the wounded boy.

Grath put his hand over Flip's and bent close to his face, speaking quietly. Although Flip could not respond, the look in his eyes said that all was forgiven. Grath and the younger boy touched their antennae together briefly. Then Flip's antennae drooped across his face, and his body went still. Flip was gone.

"No!" Tray sobbed. She leaned over Flip's body, laying her head on his chest. "No," she whispered. "Not you."

Grath put a comforting hand on Tray's back. "It's not your fault, Tray," he said softly. "Flip was his own person, and made his own choices. We were all doing what we thought needed to be done."

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Tray looked up at Grath gratefully, her large eyes full of tears. Then she dropped her head. "But our way was not the right one," she said.

"I do not think so, either," Grath said. "But now we are on another path. The path to peace."

Tray nodded slowly. Qui-Gon sensed that over time she would come to terms with Flip's death. But it would not happen quickly.

Grath gazed down at Flip's lifeless body, then leaned over and briefly said good-bye. Tray did the same, then several other Freelies. The medics covered Flip with a heavy gray cloth and loaded the gravstretcher into the transport.

Grath, Tray, and Obi-Wan stood silently together as the transport took off. Slowly more Freelies gathered around the trio, twining their arms and droning. The sound was soft at first, then grew louder and more intense. It was full of pain and sorrow. The young group had been through a lot, and would now need to cope with a death among them. It would not be easy, Qui-Gon knew. And there was still much work and challenge to come.

When the last of the injured Vorzydiaks had been taken to med units and the dust had finally settled, there was a moment of calm. But soon the moment of peace was over.

A large Vorzydiak laborer pointed an angry finger at the Freelies. "Look at what you've done," he said, gesturing toward the rubble. "How can we work?"

"Have you no respect?" asked another angry laborer, shouting at the Freelies. "Have we taught you nothing?"

"You've taught us plenty," answered a voice from the cluster of Freelies. "You've taught us that work is all you care about. And that *this* is what we have to do to get your attention."

Very quickly the scene erupted into a giant shouting match between the Freelies and the laborers. Qui-Gon watched from the sidelines beside a handful of retirees. The argument was going nowhere, each side convinced that the other was at fault. Qui-Gon was about to take a step forward when Obi-Wan

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separated himself from the Freelies and moved to stand between the two groups.

"It is useless to lay blame," he said in a commanding voice. "I think you can all agree that the damage has been done." Obi-Wan spoke slowly and calmly, looking into the faces of laborers and Freelies alike. Qui-Gon felt a wave of pride well up within him. When had Obi-Wan become so wise?

"You must work together to heal the wounds that have shown themselves today." Obi-Wan directed his plea toward the laborers. But in spite of the truth in Obi-Wan's words, Qui-Gon could tell the adult Vorzydiaks were not convinced.

"My Padawan is right," Qui-Gon said as he joined Obi-Wan in the space between the factions. "The generations have much to offer one another." He placed an arm around Obi-Wan's shoulder. "In time you may understand that there is more to life than work and productivity. You do not have to agree all of the time, but if you take time to listen, to learn from one another, the work you do together will become infinitely more rewarding."

The words resonated within Qui-Gon as he spoke them. He hoped Obi-Wan understood that he was not just speaking about the Vorzydiaks. He was talking about the two of them. How much they taught each other. How happy it made them to work together, to depend on each other, to know that they would always be there for each other, even when they did not agree.

With a glance at his apprentice he saw that Obi-Wan understood. The two Jedi did not need antennae to communicate emotions. Their bond was strong.

Qui-Gon's words reached some of the Vorzydiaks, too. But many remained unconvinced.

"Who are you to tell us what to do?" one of the laborers asked Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan angrily.

Chairman Port struggled to the front of the crowd and Grath rushed to help him. "You are right," Port said to the angry Vorzydiak. "The Jedi are not the ones who should solve our

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problems. Together we have created this disaster." He leaned heavily on his son. "And together we must work to resolve it."

Chapter Twenty-Three

In only two days the retirement complex had changed significantly. Almost every door stood open, including the front entrance that led to the courtyard. After work hours, Vorzydiaks of all ages drifted in and out. Occasionally the sound of laughter even made its way down the once-deserted halls.

Obi-Wan walked with Qui-Gon toward the exit, marveling at the change. The Vorzydiaks would need time to mourn Flip's death and the damage he had done. The rift between the generations would not heal quickly. But Obi-Wan was hopeful.

The irregular bleat of a Vorzydiak echoed down the hall. It made Obi-Wan smile, and then stop in his tracks. It sounded like Grath.

"Master, wait," Obi-Wan called. He rushed back down the hall toward the familiar noise, and was not disappointed.

Grath sat in a circle of chairs in one of the complex bedrooms. Taking a second look, Obi-Wan noticed that instead of sleeping couches this room had been filled with chairs and tables positioned for conversation. It had been converted into a sort of leisure lounge.

Obi-Wan was pleased to see the converted room, but immediately sensed a sadness in the air.

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Grath stood and greeted his friend. "We were just talking about Flip, " he explained. "The things he did are still very painful, but sharing memories is helping all of us." He gestured to the others in the room – a few Freelies, his father, Tray, and Tray's grandmother, Ina. They all waved their antennae at Obi-Wan in greeting.

Grath turned back to Obi-Wan. "You are not leaving yet, are you?"

Obi-Wan was glad when Qui-Gon came into the room behind him and interrupted Grath's question. They were, in fact, on their way back to Coruscant.

"Chairman Port." Qui-Gon's voice was warm and deep. He crossed the small room in two steps and held out his hand to the chairman. "You're away from your office. Don't you have work to do?" Qui-Gon's eyes were alight with amusement.

Chairman Port took Qui-Gon's hand but did not return his smile. "You have shown us there is more important work to do," he said humbly. "We are grateful."

"We were on our way to thank you," Grath said. "But we stopped to talk to Ina and were sharing some memories of Flip."

Obi-Wan smiled slightly. The generations of Vorzydiaks were finally spending time together, sharing emotions. And in spite of the pain caused by Flip's death, they seemed to be enjoying it.

"We wish to thank you," Chairman Port said formally, "for assisting us in our relations with Vorzyd 5, and..." Chairman Port struggled to find the words. His flailing antennae touched the top of his son's head, tousling his hair. "And in our relationships here on Vorzyd 4."

Qui-Gon nodded, accepting the thanks.

"Oh, and we have a new plan," Tray said excitedly.

For a brief moment, Obi-Wan thought she was talking about another Freelic prank.

"The young people are helping to make an outdoor space for us," Ina explained.

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"The laborers will also be helping," Grath added. "Father is shortening the work week by one day so that there will be time."

The Vorzydiaks looked from one to the other. Their antennae waved gently back and forth as if they were riding a gentle breeze. Obi-Wan didn't think he had seen any of them looking as alive and happy as they did right now.

"There is still much to be done," Chairman Port said. "But we have begun. And together we shall finish."

"I believe that you will," Qui-Gon agreed. "But I'm afraid it is time for us to get back to Coruscant. We have our own work to do."

"Of course, of course," Chairman Port agreed.

The Vorzydiaks bid good-bye to the Jedi, and Obi-Wan followed his Master down the hall. They did have work to do, Obi-Wan knew. And it was work they needed to do together.

"Our work is well begun, my Padawan," Qui-Gon said, breaking into Obi-Wan's thoughts. They stepped outside into the courtyard, and Qui-Gon stopped and turned to his apprentice. "And though we are beyond the beginning of our journey, we are not quite at the end."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I know. I still have much to learn."

"Yet you have already grown so much," Qui-Gon acknowledged. "I am proud of you, Obi-Wan. Proud of what you have become. It is an honor to teach you, to work with you. I could not ask for a better Padawan learner."

Obi-Wan beamed. "To work then," he said. "Yes," Qui-Gon agreed. "To work."

Special Edition Book Two
The Followers

Chapter One

The hologram flickered and the ghostly figures of Bant Eerin and her new Jedi Master Kit Fisto appeared in the Temple map room. Qui-Gon Jinn studied Bant's image carefully, looking directly at her silvery eyes. He was glad to see the sensitive Mon Calamarian Padawan again. Not only was she a good friend of his own eighteen-year-old apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi, but ever since the death of her Master Tahl years ago, Qui-Gon found himself feeling protective of her.

Bant and Qui-Gon had both suffered when Tahl died, and both still felt the loss. Qui-Gon knew Bant had continued her training despite her grief.

But she still does not seem herself, Qui-Gon thought.

Looking closer, Qui-Gon saw that there was something in Bant's eyes that was not quite right. It wasn't the profound sadness he'd grown used to seeing when Bant mourned at the Temple, when the pain was still fresh. This was something else. It took Qui-Gon a second to recognize the emotion.

It was fear. Bant was afraid. The question was, of what?

"Hello Master Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan," Kit Fisto greeted the team, bowing slightly so that some of his yellow-green head tendrils fell forward around his shoulders. "I have heard much about you from my Padawan. I am pleased to have the

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opportunity to speak with you, though I am afraid what we will be discussing will not be pleasant"

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had been summoned by the Council the day before. Nobody had told them why they were to meet Bant and Kit Fisto. Since Kit Fisto was contacting them from the largely deserted planet of Korriban, Qui-Gon had at first assumed that the task would be routine.

It only took one look at Bant's expression to know that this would not be so.

The Sith. Qui-Gon had heard stories about the Sith since he was a young boy. Every generation of initiates at the Temple knew Sith stories and legends. They thrilled in telling them to one another late at night when they should have been sleeping. Qui-Gon's generation had been no exception.

Although the stories were terrifying enough to have kept young Qui-Gon awake on more than a few nights, he had always felt that they were largely invented – myths designed to scare and not inform. Even after studying Sith history and learning that the Sith *had* existed and had been powerful, Qui-Gon remained skeptical.

But his recent conversation with Jedi Master Kit Fisto forced Qui-Gon to reexamine his beliefs about the Sith.

"Master, do you believe -" Obi-Wan hesitated.

"Do I believe in the Sith?" Qui-Gon finished his apprentice's question before answering it. Clearly Kit Fisto's report had opened up questions for Obi-Wan as well.

"Of course I do. You and I have both studied their history enough to know that the Sith threat was once very real. But we also know that they were a culture that could not survive. They killed themselves off long ago. The question remaining is whether or not they pose a current threat." Now it was Qui-Gon who hesitated.

"How can they pose a threat if they no longer exist?" Obi-Wan asked.

"The danger lies not in the Sith themselves, but in their teachings, and the ability of those teachings to inspire others to evil. As long as the Sith teachings survive, there is a potential threat."

"And if someone is spreading those teachings..." Obi-Wan trailed off. Qui-Gon knew he must be thinking about what Kit Fisto and Bant had found on Korriban. How could he forget the look of terror on Bant's face as she described the horrors she and her Master had seen in the valley? Or Kit Fisto's dark eyes as he told them about the dwelling they had found... and its chilling contents?

Inside the crude shack were tomes of Sith lore and models of ancient Sith weapons. It appeared that someone had been compiling every scrap of information to be found about the Sith, both truth and myth. And scrawled on one wall was a crude drawing of a Sith Holocron beside a message written in Sith code. *Location known. Follow the leader.*

A simple Holocron was not necessarily dangerous. The crystal information-storage devices were even used by the Jedi. Palm-sized and easy to transport, Holocrons were an excellent way to store vast amounts of knowledge.

But the Jedi Holocrons that Qui-Gon had seen were square. The Holocron drawing on Korriban was pyramid-shaped, a formation unique to the Sith. And the knowledge contained in a Sith Holocron was infinitely more dangerous. It focused on dark power and how to gain, use, and manipulate it.

If one existed, and if it fell into the wrong hands, a Sith Holocron could be more than deadly.

"We have knowledge of several Sith Sects operating in the galaxy," Jedi Archivist Jocasta Nu reported. "We monitor them, but until now they have never given us much cause for alarm. They've never gained large followings, and their activities are not unlike those of other small criminal groups. They have always been more of a nuisance than a threat."

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Though it had taken him a little while to get used to working with her, Jocasta Nu was beginning to grow on Qui-Gon. He generally did not like to use the usual channels for obtaining information. But he'd come to appreciate Jocasta's straightforward manner. She never failed to provide Qui-Gon with the information he needed.

"Lately there has been increased activity at one of the higher learning institutions right here on Coruscant," Jocasta said. "According to our sources, this is due to a professor named Murk Lundi." She flashed an image of the Quermian professor onto a screen.

It was not the first time Qui-Gon had heard of Professor Lundi. An infamous galaxy historian, Lundi was popular with students and admired by his colleagues. Qui-Gon had even heard him called one of the finest historians of the era. But he did not understand what Lundi had to do with the dwelling found on Korriban.

"For the past several years Lundi has been narrowing his focus," Jocasta explained. "Now all of his research and lectures revolve around the dark side of the Force. As his focus has narrowed, his student following has grown."

Jocasta pushed several student texts toward Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. There were posters for Sith rallies and hand-drawn story strips showing Sith battles. "His classes are among the most popular on campus. His texts are so sought after they are difficult for students to obtain." She paused for a moment. "But there were several of them among the items found on Korriban."

So that's it, Qui-Gon thought. The Council believes one of Dr. Lundi's followers gathered the information that was found on Korriban.

Qui-Gon looked up to find Obi-Wan already gazing at him knowingly. Neither of the Jedi needed to say a word – their next move was clear.

It was time for a crash-course on the Sith.

Chapter Two

Obi-Wan pushed his way through the crowd of students and toward the back of the room without worrying about being spotted. It was not hard to lose himself in the throng.

The students on Coruscant were so varied that you would have had to be on fire to get even a second glance. Besides, Obi-Wan and his Master were the only ones not desperately pushing forward, trying to get a word with Professor Lundi before class started.

From his spot against the wall, Obi-Wan could just make out the Quermian teacher's head swaying slightly on its long neck in the middle of the crowd. Apart from his advanced years and the small black apparatus covering one of his eyes, Murk Lundi looked a lot like the Jedi Master Yarael Poof. He was the same species, and had the same commanding presence. But there was something very different about Dr. Lundi, something chilling that Obi-Wan couldn't put his finger on.

Across the room, Qui-Gon was also watching the professor, his eyes narrowed in steady focus. Had he noticed something else? In the din Obi-Wan considered contacting Qui-Gon on his comlink to hear his thoughts. But at that moment Dr. Lundi raised several of his arms, signaling that class was about to start.

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More quickly than Obi-Wan could have imagined, the hoard of students found seats and the room fell silent. The course hall was enormous, yet every chair was taken. Every spot to stand or lean or sit was filled by a student, and at least a dozen hovercams recorded the professor's every word for the students who could not fit inside the room.

Obi-Wan surveyed the crowd. Not only was the turnout impressive, but each student sat with rapt attention. After half an hour they remained riveted – there was no sign of drifting or feeling drowsy. Obi-Wan had hoped to spot a few students who seemed unusually drawn in or somehow conspicuous. As it turned out, he was the conspicuous one for looking around while the professor was speaking.

At the front of the room, Dr. Lundi paced in the narrow space not taken up by students. Taking small steps on his long legs, his body seemed to float as he spoke. Every now and then he paused, clearly enjoying his position and his ability to make the crowd hold its breath in anticipation of his every thought.

Murk Lundi was not at all like the teachers Obi-Wan had at the Temple. In the Temple, Obi-Wan's instructors were like partners in learning, guides who wanted to help him discover things for himself and not just force their own opinions.

Obi-Wan did not appreciate the learning style he was seeing today. Yet the more he listened to Dr. Lundi, the more he wanted to hear. Soon he, too, was waiting for the professor's next word.

"No being besides the Sith themselves has ever seen a Sith Holocron. There are rumors. Yes. There are also drawings and legends and myths. However, most historians believe that the Sith were so protective of their knowledge that they destroyed it themselves before letting it fall to the unworthy. After all, we are talking about beings who killed their Masters when they had learned all they could from them." Lundi paused and looked at his students with a sly smile. "Should I be nervous about graduation day?" Then he went on.

"Some scholars contend that the Sith did not use Holocrons at all, that they would not have been so foolish as to store so much power in a crystal that I could hold in my hand." The professor paused, gazing at one of his outstretched palms. "More power than this galaxy has known in a long, long time."

"However, if there is one thing I have learned from my lifelong study of history, it is this: Every myth is based on a small seed of truth. One has to delve deeply to find it. But it is there, below the surface, waiting to be discovered."

Obi-Wan was not sure how much time had passed before he forced himself to close his eyes and bring his mind back to the task at hand. Murk Lundi made the Sith more real than any late-night ghost story, but that was not why Obi-Wan was here. He had to stay focused.

But by succumbing, even for a short time, Obi-Wan understood Murk Lundi's hold over his students. Dr. Lundi's fascinating subject was made even more so by his own intelligence and charisma. Lundi's power over the students was impressive. And more than that, it was dangerous. Lundi's students seemed likely to believe anything their teacher said without question, and the way he spoke about the dark side made it sound enticing. Could they be inspired to delve too deeply?

Obi-Wan focused once more on the students. It had to be one of them, or someone like them, who had assembled the Sith lore on Korriban.

A small group in the first row captured Obi-Wan's attention. The four students sat front and center, leaning forward whenever the professor spoke.

The first, a dark-haired humanoid, nodded at the end of each of Lundi's statements. Next to him, a redheaded boy was so riveted that he held his hands just above his desk as if he had been about to fold them in his lap but froze when the professor began to speak. The third boy was transcribing every word on a datapad, in spite of the fact that he had his own small hovercam recording the entire lecture. Last was a girl who clung

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protectively to a coat and document case that Obi-Wan guessed belonged to Dr. Lundi.

Suddenly a yellow light went on over the desk of the dark-haired boy in the front row. Obi-Wan quickly realized that the light alerted the professor that a student wished to ask a question.

Dr. Lundi stopped in mid-sentence. His head swiveled on its long neck, and Obi-Wan caught an angry gleam in the Quermian's uncovered eye. But the anger disappeared when the professor saw who had dared to interrupt him. The humanoid boy was obviously a favorite. Dr. Lundi even called him by name.

"Yes, Norval?" he asked.

Norval stood. "Please forgive the interruption, professor. I only want to know if it is true that the Sith were more powerful than the Jedi."

Dr. Lundi laughed lightly, as if Norval's question was childish. "Of course," he said. "Power and vengeance are much stronger motives than peace could ever be. The Sith could have easily controlled the entire galaxy had they not made their one mistake..."

Dr. Lundi was interrupted by a tone signaling the end of class.

Students sat silently in their seats, hoping the professor would finish his thought. But Dr. Lundi was already collecting his coat and case from the girl in the front row.

"There will be no class next week," the professor announced. The class groaned. Lundi smiled at their disappointment. "I am taking a small sabbatical."

Yellow lights went on over desks throughout the room.

"When I return I may have exciting information to share with you." Dr. Lundi smirked mysteriously. "Until then, my assistant Dedra will answer any after-class questions."

The girl who had been holding the professor's things stood at the front of the room. Obi-Wan thought she looked overwhelmed as Dr. Lundi moved smoothly out of the course hall followed by Norval and the redheaded boy, who Norval called Omal. Obi-Wan noticed that the redheaded boy had

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bright, sharp-looking eyes. He was clearly excited, and talked animatedly with Norval about the lecture.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon exchanged a glance before they, too, made their way toward the door and slipped out of the hall. It looked as though they would be taking a little sabbatical of their own.

Chapter Three

Qui-Gon would have liked to stay and talk to the students in Dr. Lundi's class, but the professor's surprise announcement changed everything. Dr. Lundi was up to something, and the most important thing was to find out what it was and where he was going.

The Quermian moved surprisingly quickly for someone his age, but the Jedi kept up easily. Qui-Gon followed Lundi into a terminal and watched him board a midsize craft. Not knowing where the transport was going, the Jedi had no choice but to follow him aboard.

Once inside the transport it became clear that the vessel was a private, no-frills charter. The main hold had been outfitted with close rows of seats filled almost to capacity. Both the seats and the passengers looked like they had seen better days.

"Are you going to Lisal?" a voice growled from a dim corner near the entrance.

"Yes," Qui-Gon answered quickly. The ship's destination sounded familiar.

"Tickets?" the voice demanded.

"Two please," Qui-Gon answered.

"It's too late to buy them now." The surly captain stepped out of the shadows to reveal his bad breath and broken teeth to the Jedi. "If you don't have any you'll have to pay double."

"We'll be happy to pay the regular fee," Qui-Gon replied, calmly looking into the pilot's beady eyes.

"Two at the regular price, then," the captain said. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out two grimy stubs. "You'll have to sit in the back."

Obi-Wan handed the captain a few credits while Qui-Gon scanned the crowd for Murk Lundi. He was not sitting with the rest of the passengers. But with so many eyes on them the Jedi did not dare search the rest of the ship for him. At least not yet.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon squeezed into the back row and sat down. As he settled into his seat, Qui-Gon's knees pressed comically against the row ahead of him. There was not nearly enough room to accommodate the Jedi's large frame.

Several of the motley passengers ahead had turned to glare at them.

This is not a typical tour group, Qui-Gon noted. The passengers on the charter seemed surlier than the average pleasure travelers to Coruscant. Jocasta Nu had warned them that members of the Sith Sects might be anyone and that they would be difficult to pick out of a crowd. Suddenly Qui-Gon wondered if they had stumbled into the middle of a sect. Why had Lisal sounded so familiar?

The captain struggled to close the ship's doors. After pushing and then pounding several buttons he ripped the control panel off and began to tug on the sparking wires inside.

"I hope the engine is in better condition," Obi-Wan observed, gaining the Jedi a few more hard stares.

Qui-Gon wished he had had a little more time to reflect on how this mission was shaping up and what exactly he and his apprentice were getting into. It was all happening too quickly. This morning they had been asked to keep an eye on an

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influential professor, and now they were suddenly headed off-planet.

In the back of his mind Qui-Gon had a strange feeling that this trip wasn't what it appeared to be. He was suddenly filled with a feeling of foreboding. This could easily be a trap.

Qui-Gon stood. Perhaps there was still time to get off the vessel. But before he could decide what to do, the captain's swearing turned to angry shouts. Someone was screaming Dr. Lundi's name and struggling to get through the partially closed door.

It only took Qui-Gon a moment to recognize the young man trying to board. It was Norval, the dark-haired student from the front row.

The captain did his best to push the intruder back out the half-open door. Several passengers crowded around. It was not clear whether they were trying to help Norval in or help the captain force him out. Then, in a shower of sparks from the control panel, the doors suddenly opened. Norval and several passengers fell into a heap on the floor.

"You'll pay triple!" the captain bellowed, pointing at Norval and splattering him and several other passengers with spittle.

"He won't be staying," said a soft, familiar voice behind the captain. It was the professor. In the chaos Qui-Gon had not seen him appear.

"Please take me with you," Norval begged. He grabbed the edge of Dr. Lundi's robes. "You need me," he whimpered. "Nobody knows your texts as well as I do. I've studied every word. You must show me how to use the –"

"Guards," Lundi snapped. "Guards, remove this boy immediately."

Two enormous hangar guards appeared on the gangplank and pulled Norval to his feet.

"You are too old to use it on your own!" Norval continued to shriek as they pulled him out of the ship and down the ramp. "You need me!"

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Murk Lundi did not move. Even after Norval's pleas had faded and the captain had succeeded in sealing the door, he still stood staring at the durasteel hatch.

Qui-Gon seized the opportunity to leave his seat. He squeezed past the distracted passengers, pulling Obi-Wan along with him. They would not be leaving the ship. The mission was more important than he'd originally thought.

It looked as though there was a Sith Holocron and Murk Lundi was going after it.

Chapter Four

Obi-Wan tried the door even though he did not expect it to open – none of the other doors in the corridor had. So he was surprised when this one slid easily into the wall. The stale odor that billowed from the room confirmed that although the door was unlocked, it hadn't been opened in some time. The musty room would be perfect.

After motioning to his Master, Obi-Wan stepped inside to look around. It appeared he had found an abandoned laundry room. Piles of uniforms littered the floor and stagnant water filled two large basins.

Qui-Gon wrinkled his nose when he walked in. "Good work, Obi-Wan," he said quietly as he closed the door. "No one will look for us here." Pulling his comlink from his belt, the Jedi Master contacted the Temple.

"Right to follow him, you are," Yoda said after hearing Qui-Gon's report. "Find the Holocron first, we must."

And Lundi is our only clue to finding it, Obi-Wan thought.

Bant and Kit Fisto hadn't been able to give them any ideas about where the Holocron might be located. Their best option was to follow Lundi – so they could take the Holocron from him if he found it.

Qui-Gon ended his transmission. Obi-Wan could tell that he felt the same way. Unless they knew where they were going, it would be nearly impossible to get to the Holocron first.

"We need more information," Qui-Gon muttered, reactivating his comlink. A moment later Jocasta Nu's voice echoed in the small room.

"There have been rumors of Sith Holocrons in existence in several places across the galaxy. Lisal, Korriban, Kodai, Doli. Most of the claims have been investigated by Jedi teams, but nothing has ever been found."

"Thank you, Jocasta," Qui-Gon said. "As usual you have been helpful."

"I'm always here to assist with information. Feel free to contact me should you need anything else," Jocasta replied.

"Of course." Qui-Gon signed off and turned to his Padawan. "Lundi must be looking for the Lisal Holocron," he said.

That's too easy, Obi-Wan thought. "We need to know more. I'm going to find Lundi," the Padawan said. He stripped off the tunic he'd worn to blend in with the students.

"Patience, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon reprimanded quietly. "It will take time for things to unfold."

Obi-Wan knew his Master was right. But frustration was welling up inside of him. He kicked at the pile of uniforms at his feet until he saw one that looked about his size. After holding it against his shoulders, he pulled it on. It fit well enough.

"We will not discover anything tonight," Qui-Gon said. "We must give Lundi time to relax, to let down his guard. Lisal is a two-day journey. We have time." Qui-Gon arranged himself on one of the cleaner laundry piles and prepared to sleep.

Obi-Wan sighed and did the same. Qui-Gon was right, he supposed. But for him, waiting was often the hardest part of a mission. It made him anxious. And when he was anxious he could not easily sleep.

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Obi-Wan awoke suddenly. Something was not right. Sitting up quickly, he reached out to the Force to try and find the source of the danger he felt. When he was sure that there was no one in the laundry facility besides himself and his Master, he removed his hand from his saber hilt.

Beside him, Qui-Gon breathed steadily, either asleep or deep in meditation. Whatever had disturbed Obi-Wan did not seem to be upsetting his Master.

Obi-Wan lay back and closed his eyes to try and recapture an image of what had frightened him. Had it been a dream? A presence? Just a feeling?

Pyramid-shaped Holocrons floated in his mind. Certainly it was disturbing to think that such potent capsules were at large in the galaxy. But he did not think that was what had awakened him.

The Holocrons faded and another image grew. A figure. Obi-Wan allowed his fear to grow with the image. Then he relaxed and let the fear go, focusing on the figure. But no matter how he tried, he could not see a face. The visage remained in shadow and a feeling became clear – the feeling that someone had discovered them.

When Obi-Wan surfaced from his meditation, he saw that Qui-Gon was awake and had been aware of his agitation. "It is a warning," Qui-Gon said after Obi-Wan told him about it. "We must proceed with extra caution and find out where we are headed. Quickly."

Obi-Wan laughed when Qui-Gon emerged in the corridor wearing a mechanic's uniform. The pants stopped close to the top of his boots, and the sleeves were rolled up in an effort to disguise the fact that they were at least ten centimeters too short. But Obi-Wan had to admit that nobody would recognize Qui-Gon as a Jedi Master.

"You don't look any better," Qui-Gon chided his apprentice.

Obi-Wan knew it was true. Wearing the soiled uniform he had pulled from the pile the night before, he even *smelled* like a grubby mechanic.

"I think Lundi must have arranged for a private room. Let's separate and search the ship. We need to find him or his quarters," Qui-Gon said, getting down to business. "Do not let the captain see you."

Obi-Wan nodded and moved quietly down the corridor, away from Qui-Gon. He tried doors and reached out with his senses. Lundi had such a strong presence that Obi-Wan did not think he would be hard to find.

After a few minutes Obi-Wan saw the open doors to the ship's bridge. Pressing himself against the corridor wall, he paused and listened. The captain was at the helm, of course. But someone else was there as well.

It only took Obi-Wan a moment to realize it was Lundi. But what was he doing at the ship's controls?

Looking around, Obi-Wan quickly spotted a maintenance ladder. It led to a catwalk that trailed over the bridge and toward several hyperdrive access panels. If he pulled himself along on his stomach, and the captain and Lundi did not look up, he could get close enough to hear what they were saying. Obi-Wan climbed up.

"You don't seem to be understanding me, captain," Lundi said in a low, menacing voice. "I am not asking you to stop on Nolar. I am telling you."

"And you don't seem to understand that this ship is not going to Nolar. It's going to Lisal!" the captain bellowed. He slammed a meaty fist down on the controls, sending a small piece flying.

"But I don't need to go to Lisal," Lundi said, holding his ground.

Obi-Wan inched farther out on the catwalk until he was almost directly over Lundi and the captain.

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Lundi's head moved slowly back and forth as he fiddled with something under his robe. The captain followed the Quermian's small head with his eyes.

"I will only say this once more," Lundi said, his head still swaying. "The equipment I need is on Nolar. You will stop on Nolar. I will make it *very* worth your trip."

With a great effort the captain looked away from the Quermian's face and down at the folds of the professor's robe.

Obi-Wan could barely see something sparkle in Lundi's hands... he could have had something very valuable. Whatever it was, it seemed to change the captain's mind.

"I'll stop, but I'm not waiting," the captain finally spat.

"You will not regret it," Lundi growled back.

Chapter Five

The ship landed on Nolar within an hour. Obi-Wan barely had time to find his Master and brief him on what he'd heard on the bridge.

After Lundi quickly disembarked on Nolar, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon pushed their way past the puzzled captain. The Jedi followed as the professor made his way into a tiny, adjoining hangar. There was one small ship inside, and Lundi spoke briefly with its pilot before leaving the hangar.

"It looks like he just booked continuing passage," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully as the Jedi followed Lundi into the city. "But I was under the impression that Nolar was his final destination. Where do you think he's going?"

Qui-Gon let out a slow breath. "We shall soon see."

The capital city of Nolari was bustling. There was a great deal of both air and foot traffic. The city was populated by beings from many parts of the galaxy.

Obi-Wan tried to stay close to his Master, who strode purposefully ahead.

It wasn't difficult to keep track of Murk Lundi. His long neck, multiple arms, and tiny head made him an easy visual target, even in a densely populated metropolis like Nolari. But it was not long

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before an uneasy feeling came over Obi-Wan. He sensed that someone or something was following *them*. But what, or who?

Without slowing down, Qui-Gon turned back to his apprentice. "Stay close to me," he said quietly. "I think we are being followed."

"I feel a presence too, Master," Obi-Wan replied. "But I am not getting any sense of who it might be."

Qui-Gon began to move more quickly through the crowds. Obi-Wan was accustomed to his Master's long, powerful strides, but he found it difficult to move inconspicuously. In spite of the varied populace, their smelly mechanics' uniforms seemed to stick out.

Looking fleetingly over his shoulder, Obi-Wan suddenly spotted their pursuer – a humanoid figure wearing a long cape and a helmet.

"I see him, Master," Obi-Wan spoke quietly. "About forty paces behind us, to the right."

Qui-Gon nodded curtly. "We're going to have to split up," he said. "I will follow Murk. You should lead our new friend away from me, and then double back to see who he or she is."

Obi-Wan nodded. He looked over his shoulder a second time. By the time he cast his eyes forward again, Qui-Gon had disappeared into the throng.

Obi-Wan made a sharp left turn. Using his peripheral vision he saw his pursuer stop for an instant, as if unsure of which way to go. A moment later, he continued to follow Obi-Wan.

Relieved, Obi-Wan moved ahead. He zigzagged through a crowded marketplace, barely pausing to look at the delectable fruits and vegetables sold at various stands. Several vendors called out to him, aggressively trying to sell their foods. Obi-Wan's stomach growled. Unfortunately there was no time for a snack.

On the far side of the open market, Obi-Wan ducked behind a stack of crates. His tracker passed by quickly, but by the time Obi-Wan emerged from his hiding place he had disappeared

again. Quickly scanning the crowd, Obi-Wan pressed on. But he was not able to find a lone figure in a helmet wandering the streets.

Obi-Wan was beginning to worry that he had failed his assignment when he suddenly spotted a flutter of gray fabric ahead. Hurrying forward, he saw the figure vanish around a corner.

He definitely looks humanoid, Obi-Wan thought. But male or female?

Obi-Wan rounded the corner quickly and nearly collided with a group of seedy-looking characters. Annoyed by the intrusion, two of the group glared openly at the Jedi. A third pulled out a blaster and leveled it at Obi-Wan's chest.

"Wrong turn," he growled. His arm was heavily bandaged above the wrist, but the heavy blaster did not waver in his hand.

Obi-Wan kept his eyes on the man's face as he pulled his lightsaber from his belt. Had he been at Dr. Lundi's lecture on Coruscant? Or on the ship? The young Jedi had been fairly sure that he and Qui-Gon were the only passengers to disembark besides the professor.

"I'm afraid this is your unlucky day," another thug spat.

Obi-Wan stepped forward slightly and ignited his lightsaber. That action alone was usually enough to intimidate an adversary. But the thugs didn't back down. In fact, now there were two blasters aimed at him.

"Ah, a lightsaber," one of the armed lowlifes mocked. "But does he use it wisely for power and vengeance, or foolishly for peace?"

The rest of the thugs smirked, and Obi-Wan's mind jolted. He'd heard those words before, and recently – at Dr. Lundi's lecture. These lowlifes were obviously familiar with Lundi and his work. Was this an ambush? Obi-Wan wanted to ask, but one of the hoodlums fired before he could get a word out.

Obi-Wan swung. Too late. The bolt grazed his shoulder, and he felt a hot pain tear through his flesh. He ignored the fierce

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throbbing as he leaped forward and swung again. This time he hit his target and severed a thug's finger from its hand.

The lowlife howled in pain. "You can't win, Jedi," he growled. Clutching his wounded hand, he fled deeper into the alley. His wide-eyed companions were quick to follow.

After clipping his lightsaber to his belt, Obi-Wan checked his shoulder. The throbbing had subsided. The wound was minor and would heal quickly.

By the time Obi-Wan stepped into the open street, he had lost track of his pursuer. He stood completely still for a few moments, refocusing his energy to determine which way he should go. The answer was not entirely clear.

Obi-Wan started off in a new direction, heading away from the crowded marketplace. The city center soon gave way to large, storehouse-type buildings. Obi-Wan was satisfied that his pursuer was long gone when he sensed Qui-Gon's presence. Obi-Wan stopped before one of the storehouses. Then, doubling back to the door, he ducked inside.

Obi-Wan knew immediately that his Master was not alone in the storehouse. Murk Lundi was here as well. Moving carefully behind large crates and machinery, Obi-Wan made his way toward the center of the large room. Soon he could hear two men carrying on a conversation.

"I need a Nolarian 6000 drill immediately," one of the voices said. Obi-Wan recognized it as Dr. Lundi's.

Peering out from behind a vehicle, Obi-Wan saw that Lundi was talking to a machinery dealer. The dealer was holding a large wrench and his forearms were covered in grease.

"Don't have one," the dealer said flatly. "There's a shortage. And the way the mining safety committee has been watching us, there will be for a good while."

"I need a 6000. *Today*," Lundi repeated.

The dealer sighed, as if he got requests for enormous subaquatic drill rigs all the time. "Are you listening?" he asked,

annoyed. "I said I don't have one. And I don't know when I will."

Lundi stared at the man, clenching and unclenching his many hands into fists. His face contorted into a twisted scowl.

Behind the machinery, Obi-Wan suddenly felt a little hazy. His vision blurred and the voices around him echoed in his ears. From somewhere in his daze he realized that Dr. Lundi's anger was affecting him. Yoda had told Obi-Wan that anger and hatred clouded one's mind but he'd never felt this muddled by someone else's anger before. Jedi Master Yarael Poof had amazing powers of Force suggestion. Perhaps all Quermians were telepathic.

By concentrating hard, Obi-Wan was able to clear his vision and his head. He focused on what was transpiring in front of him. Lundi was now shouting at the machinery dealer.

"Pathetic weakling," he raged. "Only a fool would let such technicalities interrupt his business."

The dealer stood staring at Lundi, frozen.

Lundi turned and stormed toward the storehouse door. "I have the power to find it without your stupid machinery," he told himself. His several arms waved forcefully through the air. "It is simply a matter of timing. Yes. I just have to time it right."

What does that mean? Obi-Wan wondered as he followed Lundi out of the storehouse. His Master was not far behind, and the two Jedi stepped out into the street as if they had been together the whole time.

Lundi, however, had vanished.

Chapter Six

Qui-Gon noted Obi-Wan's injury as well as the scowl on his face as the young Jedi peered down the street. There was no sign of anyone. Like Obi-Wan, he was wondering where Lundi could have gone so quickly. But he had witnessed stranger disappearing acts.

Obi-Wan turned back toward his Master. His mouth was slightly open, as if he were about to say something. But at that moment a third figure fled in the opposite direction. Without so much as a nod to each other, the Jedi gave chase.

The figure retreated down an alley and disappeared into a narrow walkway between two buildings. The Jedi followed close behind, nearly colliding into a duracrete wall. A dead end.

Qui-Gon ran his fingers along the wall's surface to see if it was some kind of temporary barrier. The wall seemed permanent and solid, but the elusive figure was nowhere to be found.

"This mission is making me crazy!" Obi-Wan said, exasperated. "We're not getting anywhere!"

Qui-Gon gazed steadily at his Padawan. Then he bent to take a closer look at the boy's wounded shoulder.

"I was surrounded by a street gang," Obi-Wan said more quietly, but he couldn't keep his frustration in check. "They were looking for trouble and when they found I was a Jedi they

wanted to stop me even more." Obi-Wan's voice grew louder and he pulled away from his Master. "I don't understand how there can be so many people after us when we hardly know what we are after ourselves!"

The young Jedi's response was not appropriate, of course. A Jedi Knight did not throw temper tantrums. But this mission *was* frustrating. In addition to the humiliation of being injured by a band of ruffians, Obi-Wan, he realized suddenly, was feeling anger fed by close contact with the dark side. It was essential that he be patient and guide him in the right direction. If he didn't, the boy could take a fateful turn and be lost to him forever.

"You must not let the nature of this mission disturb you so, Padawan," Qui-Gon said calmly.

"I know it is difficult. We are dealing with a powerful evil. But becoming angry only takes you a treacherous step closer to the dark side."

Obi-Wan looked down at his feet, as if ashamed of his anger.

"Anger and fear of the dark side are easy paths," Qui-Gon went on, as if Obi-Wan had spoken of his shame. "It is not difficult to let negative emotions overtake you. It *is* difficult to let them move through you and leave without reacting to them. Yet that is exactly what you must do."

Obi-Wan nodded, and Qui-Gon sensed that the boy understood in his head what, he was telling him. But he also knew that it was much harder to feel it in one's heart.

Without speaking, Qui-Gon turned and left the dead-end alleyway, heading back toward the street. "Let us review what we do know," he said as he strode forward. In truth he did not feel as confident about how to proceed as he appeared. But he wanted to give his Padawan a sense of positive direction.

"We know that Dr. Lundi has a large and zealous following of students – and many others as well. There are Sith Sects throughout the galaxy and they are very likely in touch with one another. That could explain why so many people are anxious to stop us. We know Lundi is after a Sith Holocron, and that he

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needs difficult-to-obtain mining equipment to get it. Or at least he would have liked to have had the equipment to go after it. We also know that there is some question of timing, and whether Lundi can manage the powerful Holocron on his own."

"Those are just the rantings of a delusional student," Obi-Wan pointed out. "One who was desperate to be included on the trip."

Qui-Gon paused in his step, but only slightly. "True," he agreed. "But we have received accurate information from far stranger sources."

Obi-Wan did not respond, and Qui-Gon did not pressure him any further. The boy needed time to process his emotions.

The Jedi decided to head back to the hangar. If they moved quickly they might be able to steal aboard Dr. Lundi's newly hired ship before it departed.

Making their way back toward the marketplace, Qui-Gon pulled his comlink from his utility belt. It was time to contact the Jedi Council. This mission was anything but ordinary, and he wanted to keep Yoda informed about how it was developing.

He was surprised by the information that Yoda had for *him*.

"Information about another, larger collection of Sith items we have," Yoda said gravely. His voice was steady, but Qui-Gon sensed that the wise Jedi Master was alarmed nonetheless. "An anonymous informant it was."

Qui-Gon listened intently to everything Yoda said, pausing in the street several times. Obi-Wan slowed alongside him, his eyes registering curiosity and concern. When the transmission was finished, Qui-Gon sighed heavily. He was beginning to get a bad feeling about all of this.

"They've discovered other Sith artifacts," Qui-Gon began.

"I thought it was something like that," Obi-Wan said with a serious nod. "What did they find?"

"A whole storehouse full of partially constructed weapons and devices, and copies of Dr. Lundi's texts and teachings," Qui-Gon replied. "The trademark drawing of a Sith Holocron was on the wall."

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Obi-Wan was quiet for a moment as they continued to head back to the hangar. "Where was the storehouse?" he finally asked.

"Umgul, in the Mid Rim," Qui-Gon replied. He quickened his stride slightly. The sooner they got back to the hangar, the better.

Obi-Wan kept up with his Master. "Nowhere near the first stash," he said thoughtfully.

"Exactly," Qui-Gon agreed with a nod. Though he and his apprentice had only recently become aware of them, Sith Sect followers were becoming a hard, cold fact of life.

Qui-Gon moved past an alien selling electronic gadgets and a humanoid female pushing a loaded fruit cart.

Do they study the Sith? he wondered.

A small crowd of people suddenly appeared in front of Qui-Gon, and he momentarily lost track of his apprentice. Normally this would not have bothered him. It was impossible to keep his eyes on his Padawan at all times. But for some reason this time it was disturbing.

Before he could weave through the cluster, blaster fire rang out.

Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan had his lightsaber activated in less than a second. But with the screaming hoards of people on all sides of him, it was difficult to tell where the bolts were coming from. Focusing his energy, he stood completely still for a nanosecond, then slashed out, ignoring the pain in his shoulder. He successfully deflected three bolts before the firing stopped.

Screams of panic echoed around him long after the firing was over. In the aftermath it was nearly impossible to be certain of the origin of the shots. Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber amid more screams and stares. Luckily, nobody appeared to be hurt.

Suddenly Qui-Gon was by his side again. His Master did not need to speak for Obi-Wan to know that there was no use trying to pursue their assailant. The issue at hand was finding the most direct escape route.

Qui-Gon led the way through the crowd to a secluded area outside the market. They were just getting their bearings when more blaster fire rang out – and whizzed past Obi-Wan's head, nearly grazing an ear. Obi-Wan dropped, then quickly got back on his feet. It was definitely time to return to the hangar.

As they raced through the streets, Obi-Wan wondered if life on Nolar was always this hazardous or if the Jedi had been targeted specifically. If so, by whom? The thugs in the alley?

How large a network of Sith Sects could there be? And who was informing them?

Another blaster bolt whizzed past them, but it missed the Jedi by nearly a meter. They were getting away.

Obi-Wan ran after his Master. He appeared to be taking a roundabout path, probably in an attempt to lose their pursuer altogether. As they turned corners and wove through the streets, they gradually left their assailant behind.

Finally the Jedi arrived back at the hangar. Obi-Wan rushed inside and skidded to a stop, but the ship Lundi had hired was gone. Its pilot was lying in a heap on the floor.

The Jedi rushed to the pilot. His large rust-colored head lay on the ground at an odd angle. There was an ugly lump at the base of his neck, and one of his long arms was draped over his closed eyes.

Squatting down beside him, Qui-Gon took his pulse. "It's weak and slow, but it's there," he reported, sitting back on his heels.

"Do you think he's been drugged?" Obi-Wan asked, looking over the body. The pilot's two-toed feet were pointing at awkward angles.

"It looks that way," Qui-Gon replied. "As well as being struck on the head." He stood up with a sigh. "It may be several hours before we are even able to talk to him."

Obi-Wan held back his exasperation. Another roadblock. They were on an important mission, yet had no idea where they were going or what they were supposed to do. And to top it off, they were stranded on a planet with someone who wanted to stop them, possibly for good.

Trying not to let frustration overtake him completely, Obi-Wan turned his back on the pilot and sat down to wait.

Two hours later, the pilot groaned and sat up groggily. Looking around, he appeared to take in the two Jedi and the empty space where his ship had been a few hours ago. There was

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a moment of heavy silence before he began to shout in anger. He tried to leap to his feet, but quickly sat back down. Gingerly feeling the back of his neck, he found the lump and shouted some more.

"Try to remain calm," Qui-Gon said in a soothing tone. The pilot cursed but didn't attempt to stand up again.

"Your ship was stolen, then?" Qui-Gon asked. He got up and crossed the hangar in a few quick strides.

"Well, I don't think I *misplaced* it," the pilot replied hotly. The sound of his voice was strange, since it came out of his two mouths at once. He eyed Qui-Gon with distrust. "Who are you?"

"I am Qui-Gon Jinn and this is my apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi," he replied. "We believe the being we are following may have stolen your ship. Can you tell us what happened?"

The captain gently rubbed the lump on the back of his neck. "I was working on my ship – making minor adjustments to the hyperdrive. Someone came up behind me and whacked me on the back of my neck." The pilot winced as he continued rubbing his wound.

"Did you see your attacker?" Obi-Wan asked.

The pilot shook his head. "I didn't see anyone. Or hear anything, actually. It could have been any thief or scoundrel. There are plenty around here."

"Do you think it was the being who hired passage on your ship a few hours ago? The Quermian?"

"How do you know about the Quermian?" the captain asked. But before the Jedi could reply he waved his hand through the air dismissively. "It doesn't matter. But I don't know why he'd attack the pilot who was about to take him to a place he asked to go."

"Perhaps he was interested in piloting the ship himself," Qui-Gon mused.

"Or saving the fare," Obi-Wan added.

The pilot sighed. "There are many thieves on Nolar. This kind of thing happens all the time." He looked around the empty hangar and a spark of fury came into his eyes. "Just not to me."

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Obi-Wan knew how the pilot felt. He'd been frustrated with this mission pretty much since it started.

But at the moment he and Qui-Gon needed information more than anything else. He had to stay calm and focused.

"Can you tell us where you were going to take the Quermian?" he asked.

"Of course," the pilot said. Obi-Wan noticed that he seemed more willing to help the Jedi. Perhaps he thought it might get his ship back. "I had just finished keying the information into my navcomputer. I remember because it's not a planet I'm asked to fly to very often. In fact, I can't say I've ever been there."

"And the name of the planet?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Kodai," the pilot said. "We were going to Kodai."

Chapter Eight

Qui-Gon thanked the pilot and got to his feet. He had no way of knowing if the ship was really going to Kodai or not; Dr. Lundi was certainly smart enough to throw them off the trail or even deftly set a trap. But they had nothing else to go on. The sooner they could get to Kodai to investigate, the better.

"Do you need help getting somewhere?" Qui-Gon asked the pilot.

The pilot got to his feet. Though it had been only minutes since he'd woken up, he was already quite steady. "No, I'll be fine," he replied. "But if you find my ship, you know where I am."

"Of course," Qui-Gon said. "We'll do what we can."

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon quickly left the small hangar and made their way down the street and into a larger one. It was full of ships of all sizes, and pilots from all over the galaxy talking shop or tinkering with their vessels. It seemed like it would be easy enough to hire one of them.

Qui-Gon strode up to a pilot and asked if he would take them to Kodai. "Kodai?" the pilot repeated. "You've got the wrong guy."

"I'll take you there, but I won't land – at least not until next week," said another.

Qui-Gon asked half a dozen pilots before he finally found one who was willing to make the journey, a humanoid who wouldn't give them a last name. "Call me Elda," she said before agreeing to drop them off and leave immediately. She could not be convinced to wait around for the return trip.

The Jedi could not afford to be choosy. They boarded right away. While the pilot readied the ship, they settled in for the journey.

"Not many people want to go to Kodai right now," Elda said as she keyed the destination points into her navcomputer.

Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow. "I gathered as much," he said. "Why is that?"

The pilot turned to look over her shoulder at Qui-Gon, giving him an "If you don't know I'm not going to tell you," look.

Qui-Gon didn't prod. *It's just as well*, he thought. *I can get the information from the Temple.*

Stepping out of the cockpit and into the hold, Qui-Gon switched on his comlink. He had heard of Kodai, and thought it was located somewhere in the Outer Rim Territories. If he was not mistaken, its surface was mostly covered by a vast sea.

His comlink crackled to life and a moment later Temple Archivist Jocasta Nu's voice echoed quietly in the hold of the ship.

"It is good to hear from you, Qui-Gon," she said. "How is the mission going?"

"It's hard to tell at the moment," Qui-Gon responded honestly. "I was hoping you could provide me with information on the planet Kodai."

"Kodai, in the Outer Rim," she said. There was a brief silence as Jocasta plugged the data for the request into her Temple computer. "I seem to remember something about a massive, swelling sea."

Qui-Gon could hear Jocasta pressing buttons and keys on a computer. Then she spoke.

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"Kodai is, in fact, covered by a giant sea – a sea that hundreds of years ago swelled so much that it drowned most of the planet's land- dwelling inhabitants," she reported. "Today there is only one pocket of land – a single city. It is sparsely populated by a few thousand Kodaian who spend most of their time trying to preserve their way of life on land, in spite of the fact that most believe that the sea will rage again and kill them all." Jocasta was silent for a moment. Qui-Gon guessed that she was reading ahead.

"Interesting," she murmured. "It seems that the sea has shown no signs of raging in the last hundred years. In fact, the opposite seems to occur. Every ten years, when the planet's two moons sync up, the sea experiences a spectacularly low tide."

"I see," said Qui-Gon, filing away this information.

"That's not all," Jocasta said. "What's particularly fascinating is that the planet's moons will be syncing up the day after tomorrow."

"Interesting timing," Qui-Gon agreed. It seemed obvious enough that Lundi's trip to Kodai at this particular moment and his search for mining equipment were not coincidences. But he was still not clear about why it had been so difficult to find a pilot to take them to Kodai.

Jocasta was quiet for several long moments while Qui-Gon digested this information. When she did not end the transmission, Qui-Gon guessed that she had more to tell him.

"Is there something else?" he finally asked.

"Yes," Jocasta replied slowly. "Another collection of Sith materials was found – this time on the planet Tynna in the Expansion Region. And a strange explosion has occurred on the peaceful planet Nubia. Nobody has come forward to take credit for the blast, but a drawing of a crude Sith Holocron had been scraped onto a duracrete wall outside the ruined building."

Qui-Gon closed his eyes for a moment. The discovery of the additional stash was not surprising. But an explosion was

something new – something deadly. The situation was heating up, and he felt a great deal of pressure to defuse it.

"Thank you for the information," Qui-Gon told Jocasta. "We will be in touch if we need anything further."

"Of course, Qui-Gon. I will be here if you need me."

As Jocasta switched off her comlink, Qui-Gon felt a pang of sorrow. He wished that those parting words had been spoken by the woman at the Temple who had helped him with research in the past – Tahl. Qui-Gon had been deeply in love with Tahl, and though she had been killed several months ago, her absence still felt like a blade in his chest.

Qui-Gon put away his comlink and sat down on the floor to meditate until the path was clear. He was just beginning to feel his body relax when Obi-Wan rushed into the hold.

"Master!" he shouted, alarmed. "There's a bomb on board!"

Chapter Nine

Qui-Gon was on his feet in an instant. He followed his apprentice to the bridge, where the bomb had been planted underneath a low shelf. Bending down carefully, Qui-Gon examined the device. It was black and square with a simple timer on top – and a crude drawing of a Sith Holocron etched into the side.

"I suppose I should have expected something like this," Elda griped from her seat at the controls. "I just hope your famous Jedi powers can defuse that thing before it blows up my ship – and us along with it."

"I'll do my best," Qui-Gon said wryly. "Do you have a set of tools we could use?"

The pilot pointed to a small box in the corner. "You should find everything you need in there," she said.

Obi-Wan brought the tools over to his Master and crouched down beside him. "This symbol is becoming familiar," he noted. "But the device itself does not look too sophisticated."

"It should not be a problem to defuse," Qui-Gon said, casting a glance toward the captain. "But I'm not so sure about our pilot's temper."

Obi-Wan cracked a smile. Leave it to Qui-Gon to find humor in a moment like this.

Qui-Gon opened the tool kit and pulled out a long, slender pick. After carefully inserting it into the side of the bomb casing, he slid it back and forth until he heard an audible beep. The box opened and several strands of colorful wire popped out. A timer behind the wires indicated that the bomb would go off in less than a minute.

"Not much time," Obi-Wan murmured quietly.

Qui-Gon knew his Padawan was right, and he had not expected to see so many different colored wires inside the bomb. It was a more complicated design than he'd originally thought.

Focusing his energy on the bomb, he snipped all of the red wires. But the timer did not switch off. It now read forty seconds, and was counting down.

"Perhaps it is this black wire," Obi-Wan suggested quietly.

Qui-Gon did not think this was likely. It was the only black wire, and too obvious a solution. But as he studied the wire, he sensed that there was indeed something significant about it. Still, he wasn't sure that cutting it was the right thing to do.

"Twenty seconds," Obi-Wan said.

Qui-Gon looked at the bomb more closely. One end of the black wire ran directly into the metal inside the casing. At the other end the black plastic coating ended a few millimeters before the wire touched the metal. Underneath the missing black coating was a series of bright yellow wires. They fanned out to form a row and slid neatly into a metal jack.

"Ten seconds."

Qui-Gon reached down and placed his thumb and forefinger on either side of the yellow wires. Closing his eyes, he twisted them away from the jack. There was a small popping sound as the wires pulled free.

The timer on the bomb continued to count down. But when it reached one second, it suddenly stopped.

"You did it, Master," Obi-Wan said, sounding relieved.

Qui-Gon opened his eyes and saw the number frozen on the timer. "With time to spare," he said wryly.

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"I guess you Jedi are good for something," Elda grumped. But there was humor in her voice, and she was smiling broadly. "Thank you," she added quietly.

Qui-Gon put the tools back into the case and got to his feet. "You're welcome," he said.

Back in the hold, Qui-Gon closed his eyes and started to meditate for the second time that day. The planted bomb was something else to consider. Was it meant to kill them, or simply throw them off guard? And who had planted it? It must have been someone who was following them closely, someone who was highly prepared. Not much time had elapsed between the Jedi arranging their travel and their subsequent takeoff.

Qui-Gon began to breathe deeply, letting his mind clear and then focus. But something was interfering with his concentration. His Padawan was pacing.

Qui-Gon opened an eye. "Why don't you try some meditation?" he asked.

Obi-Wan nodded and sat down. Even after he had stopped pacing the room, Qui-Gon could tell he was still agitated. With both eyes open now, he studied his Padawan. Obi-Wan sat cross-legged in a chair with his eyes closed. But his shoulders were tensed, and beneath his eyelids Qui-Gon could see movement.

"Are you all right, Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon asked softly.

Obi-Wan opened his eyes and met his Master's gaze. "Yes," he said slowly. And then, "Well, I don't know."

"You are afraid," Qui-Gon stated plainly.

A look of shame came over Obi-Wan's face, but he did not deny it. "My heart is full of dread," he admitted. "I wish we were on another mission – any other mission. I am not sure I have the courage to face the Holocron... "

Qui-Gon leaned toward his apprentice. "You have every right to be afraid," he said quietly. "Allow yourself to feel the fear – really feel it – and then let the emotion go. If it comes back, feel

it again and let it go again. There should be no shame in one's emotions."

"I am not at fault if it comes back?" Obi-Wan asked, looking up.

"No, Padawan," Qui-Gon replied. "We cannot control how we feel. Only how we choose to handle our feelings."

A look of true relief crossed Obi-Wan's face, and he smiled slightly. His shoulders relaxed and he closed his eyes. Qui-Gon could almost see the fear leaving his Padawan. He was glad his advice had provided some relief.

Sitting back, he closed his eyes, too. He only hoped the advice would work as well for him.

Chapter Ten

By the time the ship landed on Kodai, Obi-Wan felt refreshed and no longer afraid. He was ready to move forward with the mission. Unfortunately, doing so was not going to be easy.

Although the Jedi were quite certain that they were on the right planet, it was not at all obvious where they should go or what they should do. It was only clear that they were running out of time.

Not to mention that wherever they went, they seemed to be attacked. Their pursuer, or pursuers, would not be shaken and wanted them stopped.

After dropping the Jedi off on a tiny platform in the sole island city of Rena, Elda entered new coordinates into her navcomputer.

"Don't think I'm sticking around just because you diffused that bomb, " she grumbled, eyeing the shabby-looking city. "Good luck to both of you," she added, shaking her head. "I have a feeling you're going to need it."

"Thanks for the support," Obi-Wan said dryly as he and Qui-Gon walked down the ship's ramp. "And the transport, of course."

Out in the bright sunshine, the Jedi had to shade their eyes until they adjusted to the light reflecting off the vast sea. The city

was small and appeared to have few inhabitants outside. There were cantinas, a single lodging house, and a marketplace where locals exchanged and bought food, most of which was harvested from the sea. Giant walls lined the streets – an attempt at flood protection, Obi-Wan guessed.

While the locals didn't stare at them – in fact, nobody looked at them at all – Obi-Wan got the feeling that they were definitely being noticed. The Kodaian were trying too hard not to look at them. As the Jedi approached they cast their yellow eyes downward or bent their slender necks to study the horizon in the opposite direction.

"Do you get the feeling they wish we were invisible?" Qui-Gon asked. "Our presence seems to pain them."

"Exactly," Obi-Wan agreed. It was a strange feeling.

"Let's check the lodging quarters," Qui-Gon suggested. "We need a place to stay, and Lundi may be there as well."

Obi-Wan nodded in agreement and they strolled into a shabby but clean lobby. A thin Kodaian sat on a stool behind a counter. When he saw the no- longer-disguised Jedi, he nervously got to his feet.

"May I assist you with something?" he asked, fiddling with his stubby fingers and gazing at the floor. Obi-Wan wondered if he was always this agitated around his customers.

"We would like to rent one of your spaces," Qui-Gon explained. "Do you have any to spare?"

The Kodaian closed his golden eyes for a moment, surprised by the question, and Obi-Wan guessed that Kodai and the quarters did not have visitors particularly often. After taking Qui-Gon's credits, the Kodaian placed a card with a door code on the counter. Their room was 4R.

"We are also looking for a Quermian guest we believe you have at the moment. A Doctor Murk Lundi."

The Kodian winced at the mention of Lundi's name. Without making eye contact he pointed to an old turbolift at the end of the hall. "His quarters are on the second floor, number 2F."

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The Kodaian looked around to see if anyone was nearby before continuing, then leaned forward and addressed Obi-Wan's boots. "He's a fine guest. He hasn't spoken to anyone since he got here. Hasn't even come out of his room."

Obi-Wan thought this was interesting information. He had gotten the distinct impression that the professor liked an audience. Any audience.

"Thank you," Qui-Gon said, taking the key.

The Jedi made their way down the hall and stepped into the turbolift. An older model, it shuddered as it moved up the single flight to the second floor.

Dr. Lundi's room was located at the end of the hall, and the room next to it was rented out. With the exception of breaking in or listening at the door, there was no way to know what was going on inside.

Obi-Wan put his ear to the door and focused his auditory senses, but found it difficult to concentrate. It almost felt as if something was blocking his connection to the Force. He could not hear anything on the other side.

"Why do you suppose he would hurry to get here only to lock himself up and do nothing?" Obi-Wan asked.

"We do not know what he is doing," Qui-Gon pointed out. "It's impossible to tell what is going on inside."

Another dead end. Obi-Wan let out a long sigh. Fear and frustration began to well in him once again, and he closed his eyes and relaxed his muscles until he felt these emotions fade. It was not easy, but he was able to do it.

Qui-Gon was smiling faintly and nodding at him when Obi-Wan opened his eyes. "Well done, Padawan." He pointed toward the turbolift. "Perhaps we can gather information if we talk to the Kodaian," he added, turning away from the closed door.

Obi-Wan followed. "Right," he said sarcastically. "After we get them to look deep into our eyes."

"So glad to see you are maintaining a sense of humor," Qui-Gon said as they stepped back into the turbolift.

Back outside, it quickly became clear that it would be nearly impossible to get Kodaians to talk to them openly.

"Excuse me," Obi-Wan said, trying to appear friendly as he approached a Kodaian woman.

The Kodaian stopped but did not look up at the Jedi. She stepped from one foot to the other as if unable to stand still. "Yes?" she whispered.

"We are looking for information about a Quermian visitor.

A professor. He is here to dig up an artifact at the bottom of the sea – "

At the mention of the bottom of the sea the woman looked up, clearly alarmed. Her eyes were as large as saucers and her hands began to tremble. "I cannot help you," she said. "I must go now."

Watching her hurry away, Obi-Wan wondered if her fear was caused by interaction with outlanders or the mention of the sea, the current state of the moons, and the impending low tide. Or perhaps Kodaians simply lived in a constant state of fear because of their difficult past. Whatever the reason, she clearly did not want to share information.

Obi-Wan was looking around for someone else who might talk to them when he spotted a young boy watching them from several meters away. Unlike the other Kodaians, he looked right at them and did not seem afraid.

"Have you seen a visitor with a long neck and many arms and hands?" Qui-Gon asked, approaching the boy.

The boy nodded and pointed to the lodging quarters. "He's inside. But hasn't come out. If you want information, go to the cantina and ask for Reis. He'll tell you whatever you want to know."

Obi-Wan smiled down at the boy, grateful for the tip. "Thanks," he said.

Reis was not hard to find. He sat in a bare, dingy corner sipping a mug of drale, the only humanoid in the place. His gray hair was matted against his head and his face was unshaven.

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But his dark eyes were sharp as he took in the approaching Jedi.

"Mind if we sit down?" Qui-Gon asked.

Reis continued to size up each of the Jedi in turn, pausing where their lightsabers hung from their utility belts. "Not at all," he said. "I've always got time to talk to Jedi. Suppose you want to know all about the Holocron, eh?"

Obi-Wan felt a wave of shock at the mention of the word *Holocron*. Finally, someone else said it first. Perhaps now they would get the answers they so desperately needed.

The Jedi were quick to sit down, and Reis smiled. "Thought that might get your attention," he said. He took a long swig of drale.

"It's there, all right," he said, putting the mug down. "Been there for thousands of years. Problem is, no one can seem to get it. Everyone wants it, but no one can get it. They try, but turn up dead or crazy every time."

"Yet attempts are still made to retrieve it?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Of course. People can't leave that kind of power alone," Reis replied with a wave of his grubby hand. He leaned toward the Jedi, and Obi-Wan could smell the stale drale on his breath. "I've heard that somebody, somewhere has offered to pay an incredibly large fortune for the Holocron. Nobody knows who it is. Still, it makes going after it a pretty desirable propo –"

Obi-Wan suddenly stopped listening when a familiar figure entered the bar. It looked like Omal, from Dr. Lundi's lecture on Coruscant. The younger Jedi squinted, but the cantina was dark and he couldn't be sure. With a pang of guilt he realized that his observation abilities hadn't been their strongest at the lecture. Things had been a little hazy.

"Excuse me," Obi-Wan said, getting up from his chair and ignoring Qui-Gon's quizzical look. If it was Omal, Obi-Wan wanted to talk to him.

Obi-Wan crossed the cantina quickly, but not quickly enough. Whoever was at the bar saw him coming. With a panicked glance

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over his shoulder, the person disappeared out the door and into the street.

Chapter Eleven

Obi-Wan rolled over on his sleep couch for the hundredth time. He could not rest. He wasn't sure if the synchronizing moons were the cause of his restlessness, or if it was just the ominous feeling he hadn't been able to shake since he first encountered Murk Lundi. Either way, he could not sleep.

Giving up entirely, Obi-Wan left the lodging quarters and wandered down to the beach. Perhaps the rhythmic sound of the waves would soothe him. He needed to get some rest before taking a turn watching Lundi's door. Qui-Gon's shift was nearly up.

Obi-Wan's steps echoed in the still night as he walked. The darkness seemed to swallow him. After donning his night goggles he walked and walked, expecting to see and hear the water at any moment.

I'm sure the sea was much closer to the main street than this, he thought. Obi-Wan suddenly felt confused, as if he had walked onto a completely different planet. Wasn't Kodai covered by a vast sea?

Obi-Wan stopped and stared ahead, concentrating hard. At first he could not see any water. Then he thought he saw a liquid shimmer, but it was far away. He suddenly realized that the water had receded hundreds of kilometers since that afternoon.

Peering in the other direction, he spotted a large group of Kodaian's farther down the beach. They carried torches and hovered around what appeared to be an ancient ruined structure, frantically digging at the seafloor. They were obviously trying to scavenge parts of the city that were lost in the flood hundreds of years ago.

Watching them from a distance, Obi-Wan was suddenly filled with a deep sense of sadness. It would be awful to lose so much of your history to a raging sea. And to be tortured every ten years by the opportunity to find the broken pieces of it.

Obi-Wan turned back to the water – or lack of it. In the near darkness he could not even be sure that the reflections he saw were, in fact, the sea.

An image and a voice flashed in Obi-Wan's head – Lundi storming out of the storehouse on Nolar. "I just have to time it right," he had said.

With a jolt, Obi-Wan knew that Lundi had been waiting for the water to recede so that he could get the Holocron. The Kodaian sea would be at its lowest tide in a decade in just over an hour.

Obi-Wan raced through the darkness back to the lodging quarters. Outside the building he spotted someone racing away. Omal? Unfortunately it was too dark to tell, and he had no time to go after the figure. He had to get to Qui-Gon. When his comlink wouldn't go through, he headed back.

"Master!" Obi-Wan shouted, but stopped short. Qui-Gon was not at his lookout post and the door to the professor's room was wide open. No one was inside.

Suddenly Qui-Gon was behind him assessing the situation. "I was only gone a moment," he breathed. "I got a communication from Jocasta Nu and stepped away. He can't be far."

Once again Obi-Wan felt frustration well inside him. How were they going to locate Lundi and the Holocron now?

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"We'll have to go on our instincts," Qui-Gon said, as if reading his Padawan's mind. "If we listen carefully the Force will guide us."

Obi-Wan knew his Master was right. And anyway, they had no other choice.

Silently, Obi-Wan led Qui-Gon toward the water. The seemingly endless beach was now teeming with Kodaians and their digging tools. Pausing for a moment to close his eyes and focus, Obi-Wan sensed that there was a deserted area farther north on the sand.

The Jedi walked out for several kilometers, moving as quickly as they could. All around them Kodaians were uncovering artifacts from the infamous flood. Some held their newly discovered treasures high above their heads with glee, while others fell to their knees in tears. Obi-Wan felt for them.

Up ahead was a strangely deserted strip of sodden land. Kodaians worked busily on either side of it, but the raised area was completely empty.

"It's almost as if an invisible barrier is keeping them away from this area," Obi-Wan commented.

"Perhaps one is," Qui-Gon replied, looking around.

The Jedi hurried ahead. Several Kodaians stopped their digging and stared after them.

They did not avert their eyes now. Some even shouted warnings. The Jedi ignored them. As Obi-Wan moved forward, he began to feel something dark and powerful surrounding him. Horror and relief collided within him. They were definitely approaching the right place. The Sith Holocron was not far away.

Letting his fear slip through him like water through a sieve, Obi-Wan moved forward. He was so intent on finding Lundi and the Holocron that he didn't see the crevasse in front of him.

"Obi-Wan, stop!" Qui-Gon shouted from behind.

Obi-Wan skidded to a halt centimeters before a yawning black chasm. He peered into it, but could see nothing but darkness. A wave of evil energy wafted up at him. *The Holocron.*

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Without speaking, the Jedi pulled out their cable launchers and anchored the ends firmly into the seafloor next to the crevasse. A thousand thoughts were running through Obi-Wan's mind, and he wanted to express them all to his Master. But doing so was impossible.

Glancing at each other only briefly, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan simultaneously rappelled over the edge into the blackness. Before long the top of the cliff disappeared from view.

The crevasse wall was slippery and wet. Obi-Wan took a deep breath as he continued to descend. Part of him wanted to know what he would find below, and part of him didn't.

Suddenly he felt a flicker of movement in his cable. A second later his anchor flew over the edge, and Obi-Wan found himself careening into the darkness below.

Chapter Twelve

Qui-Gon saw a figure standing above them at the top of the chasm. It leaned over the edge for a split second, then was gone. A moment later Obi-Wan's launcher cord went slack and his Padawan fell past him with alarming speed.

Qui-Gon immediately anchored himself to the cliff and reached out to the Force to try and stop the fall. But the dark energy in the giant crevasse worked against him. He felt oddly exhausted and had little ability to concentrate.

Quickly, Qui-Gon pushed past his weakness and focused harder. He willed his apprentice to do the same.

The sound of Obi-Wan's launcher anchor scraping against the side of the crevasse was music to Qui-Gon's ears. After a few seemingly endless seconds it caught, jerking Obi-Wan to an abrupt halt. He dangled in the air somewhere below Qui-Gon.

"Are you all right, Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon called down. His voice echoed off the chasm walls.

"I'm fine," Obi-Wan replied. "And I can see the bottom of the crevasse."

Qui-Gon tested his line. It was still secure. Then he rappelled the rest of the way as quickly as he could. By the time he got to the crevasse floor, Obi-Wan had stowed his cable launcher and was searching the area by the light of a glow rod. The crevasse

floor was rocky and covered by slippery vegetation. They would have to tread carefully.

"I don't see anything," Obi-Wan said. His voice sounded strangely hollow, and Qui-Gon wasn't sure if it was because of the chasm, his fall, or because they were so close to the Holocron. The concentration of dark knowledge could tap one's strength. He certainly weakened himself. But the strange hollow feeling also let Qui-Gon know they were on the right track. He felt at once repelled and drawn closer.

Qui-Gon ignited a second glow rod and the Jedi searched the area until they came across a series of footprints. With the wet vegetation covering the chasm floor, it was impossible to tell if there was more than one set of marks.

As they moved farther away from their decension point, Qui-Gon heard a low rumble. It sounded as though a storm was picking up. Or was the sea rising? It was now well past the time of the lowest tide and the water should be coming back up.

A flash of lightning split the sky above. In the blast of light, Qui-Gon thought he saw a figure struggling toward them. But before he could be certain, a plume of water began to gush up through a large gap in the rocky shelf they were standing on. Shooting meters above his head, it completely blocked Qui-Gon's view and nearly knocked both Jedi off their feet. As it rained down on them and seeped into his boots, Qui-Gon was surprised to find that the water was hot.

With a sudden sense of dread Qui-Gon realized that they were at the bottom of one crevasse, but that there were probably several just like it below. The seafloor was a honeycomb. They were by no means on solid ground.

Water continued to push out of the hole with remarkable force. There was no question that the tide was turning. When the gush finally subsided, they were up to their ankles in hot seawater. Several meters ahead of him, on the other side of the gap, Qui-Gon could see a crumpled form lying on the crevasse floor.

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Qui-Gon ran blindly toward the figure. Was it Murk Lundi?

It was. The Quermian lay limply on the crevasse floor with his face partially in the water. The apparatus that normally covered one of his eyes was gone, revealing an empty socket.

Qui-Gon was almost upon the professor when he lashed out. "You can't stop me!" he cried, lifting his head. One of his gangly arms fumbled for something under his robe, and he shakily pulled out a blaster. The weapon wobbled in his hand, and he fired recklessly.

Qui-Gon quickly dodged, escaping the blast in spite of the close range. Behind him, Obi-Wan ignited his lightsaber. The blue blade cut through the air, deflecting the bolt and knocking Lundi's blaster out of his hand. The weapon skittered across the crevasse floor and fell into the geyser gap.

"No!" Lundi cried. He struggled to get to his feet, then collapsed in the water.

"Where is the Holocron?" Obi-Wan demanded, pulling the Quermian to his feet.

"In my hand! In my hand! I held it in my hand!" Lundi screeched, jabbing at Obi-Wan with his pointed fingers.

"Where is it now?" Obi-Wan asked through gritted teeth, binding as many of the professor's skinny wrists together as he could catch.

"Let me go. Let me get it. It's not for you!" Lundi spat in Obi-Wan's face and flailed wildly but he did not have the strength to break free. "I should be the one!"

Qui-Gon's mind reeled. He could feel that they were close to the Holocron. Very close. He tried to focus, to find its location, but the dark side was playing tricks with his mind. It was so near and still beyond his mental vision. There was so much he didn't understand. If Lundi had held the Holocron, where was it now? Did someone else have it? Had he been unable to handle the power?

Questions were still forming in his mind when the rock beneath Qui-Gon's feet shuddered. For a split second the Jedi

Master considered diving into the swirling waters to find his answers. With a glance at his apprentice his sanity returned. If the Jedi could not recover the Holocron it was unlikely that anyone else could, either.

"I'll carry him," Qui-Gon told his Padawan abruptly. He did not want to waste his strength explaining himself.

Before Qui-Gon could lift Lundi from the chasm floor, a second rush of water hurtled out of the gap. Obi-Wan saw it coming and steadied his Master, helping him get the Quermian onto a shoulder. But now the water was halfway up their calves.

Obi-Wan led the way, holding his glow rod out in front of them. They had to walk carefully along the rocky shelf, back to the crevasse wall.

The water around Qui-Gon's legs made it difficult to know where to step, and Lundi was continuously flailing several arms and raving in his ear.

"The Holocron!" he screamed, struggling against Qui-Gon's firm grip. "I must get the Holocron! It's mine. Mine!"

Qui-Gon tried to ignore the professor, which wasn't easy. Finally he could see the place where they'd descended. But how were they going to get back up to the top with a maddened Quermian and only one anchored cable launcher?

"I can climb up and toss the cable back down to you," Obi-Wan suggested.

Qui-Gon wasn't sure they had time for that – or that he could make it while holding onto Lundi. But he didn't see a better option, and he couldn't think with Lundi screaming in his ear.

Obi-Wan had just hoisted himself off the rocky shelf when a small ship appeared overhead. Dropping back to the floor, he and his encumbered Master pressed themselves against the crevasse wall for cover. There was no way of knowing who was inside, or what they were after.

The ship descended as close to the crevasse as it could, and a long ladder dropped down in front of the Jedi. The vessel looked vaguely familiar, but in the darkness it was hard to identify it.

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Obi-Wan looked at his Master with uncertainty. Qui-Gon was not clear about the ship, either. But he was not one to refuse help that they truly needed.

The Jedi grabbed hold and climbed. Even with the evenly spaced rungs, getting the struggling professor safely to the ship was no easy feat. About halfway up, Lundi passed out. When Qui-Gon finally pulled himself into the ship, he was exhausted. Holding Lundi with one arm Qui-Gon gripped each step with his teeth in order to move his free hand to the next step. Twice his boots slipped on the wet rungs, nearly sending him and his heavy load into the waters below. At last he reached the ship's hatch and dragged himself and his burden aboard.

"Nice to see you again," came a gritty female voice from the cockpit. Qui-Gon was surprised to see Elda. She grinned at his reaction.

"Didn't expect to see me, did you?" she asked.

Qui-Gon shook his head. "But it's a pleasure," he told her sincerely. "Thank you for coming."

The pilot turned back to her controls and lifted the ship into the air. "You don't have to thank me," she replied. "Something about you or this place got under my skin, and I came back shortly after leaving. I just couldn't leave you here. After all, you saved my ship from being blown up. I wanted to return the favor."

"We're grateful," Obi-Wan remarked as he slumped into a chair.

Qui-Gon set Lundi down in another seat and secured him to it with a length of cable. He didn't think the old Quermian would have much strength when he woke, but he didn't want to take any chances.

Suddenly the professor's head snapped up.

Qui-Gon stepped back, but Lundi craned his long neck forward, forcing the Jedi against the ship wall.

The Quermian's good eye rolled around in its socket as he closely examined the Jedi. "Peacemakers!" he spat. "You have

begun a war." Lundi whipped his small head back and forth on the end of his slender neck. "War! War!" he repeated over and over, each time his voice growing louder and more shrill.

Qui-Gon opened his mouth to speak but saw that it would be of little use. He could only watch as the once brilliant historian whipped himself into a frenzy. The power of the dark side had corrupted him. It was clear to the Jedi Master that Lundi was insane. He would be escorted back to the Temple and evaluated. Qui-Gon felt quite certain that he would need psychiatric help. And there were also questions for the Galactic Republic regarding what he'd intended to *do* with the Holocron.

This was not the way Qui-Gon had hoped to return from this mission. He did not have the Holocron. His apprentice seemed rattled. There was also still the question of who, besides the Jedi and Professor Lundi, knew it was down there. Who had unfastened Obi-Wan's cable launcher? Had anyone else been able to get down into the chasm? The best they could hope for was that the Holocron was still at the bottom of Kodaian sea – at least until the tide dropped again in ten years.

"You can't handle it! You don't know what to do with it! You don't deserve it!" The professor raved on. Qui-Gon wasn't sure if Lundi was even talking to him any longer.

Taking a deep breath, Qui-Gon tuned out Lundi's mad rants. He tried to quiet his mind, consoling himself with the fact that the Holocron was not in Lundi's possession. Still, he knew this mission was far from over.

Ten Years Later

Chapter Thirteen

"Pathetic weaklings," Lundi spat. His uncovered eye rolled in its socket and a line of drool dribbled down his chin. "The power was mine – within my grasp. But you... you snatched it. You stole it away."

Obi-Wan watched the insane Quermian struggle in his bindings. The anger seething inside him was tangible, and the Jedi felt certain that Lundi would kill him if he could. But aside from the lucid declaration of the power he'd nearly had and then lost, much of what the professor said was incomprehensible.

Professor Lundi had almost lost his life on Kodai when he'd attempted to go after the Sith Holocron buried under the planet's vast sea. He'd survived, but his sanity was gone – eaten away by the ancient device lurking under the pounding waves.

Lundi writhed in his seat, trying to get free.

Since that fateful night on Kodai he'd been tried for the crime of attempting to bring a great evil into active existence in the galaxy. Not only was he trying to obtain the Holocron, there was significant evidence that he'd intended to use it for evil purposes.

This was not a crime the Republic took lightly.

Lundi himself had confessed to the crime. In fact, during the trial he'd boasted about momentarily having the Holocron in his hands. It wasn't easy to get his statement. His rants sometimes

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lasted days, ending only when the mad Quermian collapsed. Even then, after he'd been bound and put in a cell so that he couldn't hurt himself – or anyone else – he continued to twitch and mutter angrily in his sleep.

"Weak child," Lundi growled, glaring at Obi-Wan through the bars of his cell. "You are nothing. Nothing."

Obi-Wan stared back at the professor. His feelings for Murk Lundi had not changed in ten years. The professor's evil and insanity thoroughly repulsed him, and Obi-Wan would have liked to remain as far from Lundi as possible. But he could not defy the Council's decision. An assignment was an assignment.

Obi-Wan had been surprised when he and his Padawan, Anakin Skywalker, were summoned to the Temple earlier that day. Out of the blue, the mission they were on was taken over by another Jedi team. This had never happened to Obi-Wan before. Whenever he and his deceased Master Qui-Gon Jinn or he and Anakin were assigned to a mission, they always saw it through to completion. At least until now.

As they'd made their way through the Temple corridors, Obi-Wan had noted that Anakin was annoyed by the abrupt shift in plans. The thirteen-year-old apprentice had clearly been enjoying himself on the originally assigned mission – it allowed him to tinker with the weapons systems on a sleek ship.

"This better be good," he'd grumped.

Obi-Wan had counseled the boy, telling him that even if it wasn't "good," it would certainly be important. Anakin had merely rolled his eyes as they'd entered the Jedi Council Chambers.

Obi-Wan had momentarily marveled at this. As a Padawan learner, entering the Council Chambers always made his palms sweat, his heart race. An incredibly important place to be, it never failed to make him slightly nervous. Anakin never showed signs of nervousness upon entering the Council Chambers. He simply walked right in, as if it were the home of an old friend.

As soon as he and Anakin had entered the Chambers, Obi-Wan knew that whatever had brought them there was serious. All of the Jedi Masters were present, and the expression on Yoda's face was unusually grave.

"Rumblings once again about the Sith Holocron on Kodai there are," Yoda said, not wasting any time. "Planning to recover it someone is."

Obi-Wan had felt a wave of fear go through him. He'd been having troubling dreams and visions for several nights. At first he hadn't been sure why. Then he'd realized that almost exactly ten years had passed since he and Qui-Gon had first followed Dr. Murk Lundi to the Sith Holocron. The moons of Kodai would soon be in synchronous orbit, once again causing an amazingly low tide. And that was when attempts were made to recover the Holocron.

"That is not all," Master Ki-Adi Mundi added. There was a moment of silence in the Chambers before he went on.

"Jedi all over the galaxy have been receiving threatening messages about the Sith gaining power. Some of these messages contain images of Jedi being brutally killed."

Mace Windu cleared his throat. "At first we believed these threats to be the work of trivial criminals out for attention," he said. "But given the dangerous nature of the information in the Holocron and the fact that the Sith have returned, we must treat these threats very seriously."

"Take action immediately, we must," Master Yoda said, nodding slightly. "Fall into the wrong hands, the Holocron must not. Give the Sith such a victory, we *must not*."

Standing before the semicircle of Jedi Masters, Obi-Wan had briefly closed his eyes. He could feel his body filling with dread and wanted to let it wash through him. Doing so had not been easy.

Obi-Wan knew that he and Anakin were the obvious Jedi team for this mission. After all, he was more familiar with Lundi, the Holocron, and Kodai than any other living Jedi. But it was

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not an assignment he looked forward to – or even felt comfortable with. Not only was he without the help and guidance of Qui-Gon, but his Master had died at the hand of an emergent Sith Lord.

"What's the matter, Jedi?" Lundi spat. "Lost in a memory?"

Obi-Wan was jolted back to the moment. Something wet splattered across his face. Lundi's saliva.

"You'd better wat – " Anakin started to shout protectively. But Obi-Wan quickly raised an arm to quiet his Padawan.

Calmly wiping his face with the sleeve of his robe, Obi-Wan gazed back at the professor. He would not show anger or frustration. Though he desperately wished he could go on this mission without this crazed, evil being, he knew he could not. Their best chance of stopping anyone seeking the Holocron was to have Lundi's wealth of knowledge – however garbled and menacing – with them.

Obi-Wan stared into the old Quermian's visible eye, searching for a glimmer of repentance or sanity. Either one would grant him a small sense of hope.

But as Murk Lundi glared back at him, Obi-Wan saw neither.

Chapter Fourteen

Anakin took a small step forward, trying to see into the Quermian's eye. It was a difficult task, since his head bobbed and weaved like a bird's. Anakin knew this to be a symptom of insanity. As a boy on Tatooine, he'd seen some of the street dwellers do the same thing.

But this was different. Standing in front of Lundi's cell in the mental hospital, Anakin felt intrigued. There was something strong here – something powerful.

Anakin noted how Lundi's uncovered eye narrowed to a dark slit as he glared at Obi-Wan. It burned with a fiery hatred. He'd never seen anyone look at Obi-Wan like that. It was a little unsettling. Of course, Anakin would have chosen unsettling and interesting over boring any day. Today someone had chosen it for him.

Suddenly Lundi lunged forward, thrusting his head and long Quermian neck between the bars. Anakin leaned back as Lundi began to rant about the Holocron yet again.

"Moons are moving. Tides are turning," he rambled. A few of his gangly arms waved in the air. "I knew you would not stay away. None have. They all come to me. Crying. Begging. Screaming. 'Teach me, professor. Show me the way.' They think I have failed. But we know different, don't we?" He stared Obi-

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Wan down, then went on, almost as if he were talking to himself. "Yes, of course we know different. We know I did not fail. I could not fail. I held the power. In my hands I held the power. That is different from failure. But then I was robbed! Robbed by robbed thieves on a mission of peace. Here, Jedi. Have a piece of this!"

Lundi's many shackled arms awkwardly thrust his food out of his cell, striking Obi-Wan in the face.

Anakin looked at his Master, expecting to see some sort of reaction. But Obi-Wan didn't flinch. He simply stood before Lundi's cell with a stoic calm.

"We need your help, professor," he said quietly, "to recover the Holocron."

Professor Lundi looked up, clearly surprised. His eye widened and a smile stretched across his face, revealing two rows of decaying teeth. He put his face up to the bars again, and Anakin could smell his rancid breath.

"At last you Jedi have found the right path," he cackled.

Chapter Fifteen

It did not take long for Obi-Wan to arrange to have Lundi released into his custody. Obi-Wan, Anakin, and the professor were on a ship bound for Kodai by late afternoon.

Once they had settled in, Obi-Wan tried again to talk to Lundi. Though the Jedi knew the Holocron had last been seen on Kodai, they were not sure if it was still there. And Obi-Wan felt certain that Lundi had additional information that would prove vital to finding the ancient artifact. Even if Lundi did not intend to help the Jedi, it was possible that there would exist unintentional clues in his torrent of words and abuse.

Though he was hardly joyful, Lundi seemed glad to be out of solitary confinement. Rocking back and forth in his restraining cage, he gazed around the hold of the ship like a curious child.

Obi-Wan hoped the change of scenery would help make Lundi more cooperative. He also hoped that the Quermian was lucid enough to provide accurate information.

"The Jedi are not interested in using the Holocron to promote evil," he said, facing Lundi directly. "Rather, we wish to have it recovered so that it can be permanently housed in a safe place."

Lundi's eye glinted, and then he laughed. "You are nothing but a scared weakling – a cowardly boy," he cackled. "You haven't changed at all, and neither have the Jedi. I should have

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known that the Jedi would not want to tame the Holocron. They do not even have the strength to try."

Out of the corner of his eye, Obi-Wan saw Anakin leap to his feet. "Do not insult my Master!" he shouted. "He knows courage far better than you."

"It is all right, Anakin," Obi-Wan said calmly, placing a reassuring hand on his Padawan's shoulder. "I am not vulnerable to insults."

Obi-Wan watched Anakin turn away and sit down in the copilot's seat. Next to him, the pilot was nervously fiddling with the ship's controls. He was obviously agitated by the professor's ravings. But Lundi was now uncharacteristically silent. Glaring at the Jedi from behind durasteel bars, he did not say a word.

Obi-Wan fitfully rolled over on his sleep couch. It had been more than a day since they'd boarded the ship, and nearly as long since Lundi had spoken. Obi-Wan was now almost certain that Lundi knew who was after the Holocron – and how to get to it before they did. But the Jedi's attempts to pry information out of the professor had proved fruitless. He was locked in a battle of wills with a deranged lunatic, and the deranged lunatic had the upper hand.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and willed himself to relax. Across the room Anakin was sound asleep, the rhythm of his breathing echoing softly in the small space. Obi-Wan cleared his mind. If he didn't get some rest he would be at a disadvantage when they arrived on Kodai.

Just as he was drifting off, a familiar voice came into Obi-Wan's head.

There were others, Padawan, it said. Obi-Wan let out a long breath. The voice was Qui-Gon's. His deceased Master had always been there to help him, and still was – even in death.

Others were involved in Lundi's search for the Holocron. Contact them. Perhaps Lundi told them something that would be of help to you now.

Obi-Wan opened his eyes. *Thank you, Master*, he thought as he sat up. Getting to his feet, he quietly left the room. He wanted to contact Jocasta Nu as soon as possible. They had a couple of days before the low tide on Kodai. There was no time to lose.

It did not take Jocasta long to locate two of the three students who had been closest to Lundi. Both Omal and Dedra were living on the same planet. Obi-Wan directed the pilot to change course. They reached Omal's apartment the next day.

"Omali was one of Dr. Lundi's brightest students," Obi-Wan explained to Anakin after they made sure Lundi was secure and headed down various streets and alleys. "One of the most devoted followers. I'm hopeful he can give us information we can use to move forward."

The two Jedi walked up a flight of rickety steps to a dingy-looking door. Before knocking Obi-Wan looked around and made mental note of the quickest retreat. Lundi's fame had diminished but there was no guarantee that his former followers would be friendly toward Jedi.

When Omal opened the door, Obi-Wan knew immediately that he was no threat nor would he be able to help them. His clothing was dirty and disheveled. His shoulders drooped, and his eyes were constantly darting about, as if looking at any one thing for too long was incredibly painful. But most of all, it appeared as if Omal's mind was nearly as scrambled as Lundi's. Obi-Wan could almost feel his thoughts bouncing around in his head, bumping into one another and tangling themselves up in knots.

"What do you want?" Omal asked. He glanced at the Jedi's robes, and his hands began to shake.

Sadness and dread washed over Obi-Wan. What had happened to the bright-eyed boy he'd seen at Dr. Lundi's lecture ten years before? What had Lundi – and possibly the Sith Holocron – done to him? And what did that mean to the mission?

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"We just want to talk with you, Omal," Obi-Wan said softly. "May we come in?"

Omal didn't reply, but turned away from the door. He meandered into a small living room, and the Jedi followed. Garbage was strewn across the floor and the furniture looked as if it would collapse at any moment. The air was stale and rank. Anakin briefly waved a hand in front of his nose, but Obi-Wan shot him a look that made the boy drop both hands to his sides.

Obi-Wan quickly took in his surroundings, then turned toward Omal, who was standing awkwardly in the middle of the filthy room. He would have to be gentle with him.

"We are Jedi on an important mission," he began. "We are trying to recover the Sith Holocron so that it can be kept safely. Did Professor Lundi ever mention the artifact to you?"

At the mention of the Holocron Omal began to moan softly, rocking back and forth on his heels. Obi-Wan was about to ask something else when the front door opened and Dedra – the second student of Lundi's – came in with a bag of groceries.

Obi-Wan was relieved to see that for the most part Dedra looked like herself. She was older and had a tired look in her eyes, but had retained her sanity. Resting the bag of food on her hip, she gestured to Obi-Wan for the Jedi to come into the kitchen.

"We'll be right back," Obi-Wan said, excusing himself and Anakin. The two Jedi followed Dedra into the kitchen.

"I am Obi-Wan Kenobi," Obi-Wan said, "and this is my Padawan, Anakin Skywalker." Though he had seen Dedra at a lecture of Professor Lundi's, they had never actually been introduced.

"Your name is not important," Dedra replied.

"I know that you are a Jedi, and suspect that you are looking for the Sith Holocron."

Obi-Wan nodded. "We wish to put it safely away – for good," he explained.

A look of sadness spread across Dedra's face. "That would be nice," she said. "It has already done so much damage to so many." She glanced toward the living room. Obi-Wan knew she was not talking about the ancient tyranny of the Sith.

"Omal's mental state is fragile," she explained. "It is best not to mention Lundi or the Holocron in his presence."

"I gathered that," Obi-Wan said, feeling a twinge of guilt. "Do you know what happened?"

Dedra turned away and began to unpack some of the groceries. It looked as though she was going to feed Omal a meal. "I only know that he hasn't been the same since Professor Lundi's sabbatical ten years ago," she said.

Dedra pulled some vegetables out of a bag and began to wash them. Obi-Wan noticed that her hands were shaking slightly, and she kept her eyes on what she was doing.

"And that is *all* you know?" Obi-Wan asked, looking at her pointedly.

Dedra sighed and her hands dropped into the water basin. "No, not all," she admitted.

Obi-Wan waited patiently for Dedra to continue.

"Ten years ago Omal followed Norval, another of Professor Lundi's star pupils, to Kodai. Norval was fixated on the Holocron, and had secretly joined one of the sects obsessed with obtaining it. He figured out that Lundi was going after it, and decided the professor needed his help. Omal wanted to stop Norval from interfering with Dr. Lundi's attempt. He thought that the kind of power Lundi was talking about would be too much for Norval to handle."

Dedra switched off the water and turned toward Obi-Wan. "I don't know what happened, but it was obviously too much for Omal, too," she said in a whisper. "And since Professor Lundi has been institutionalized ever since, I guess it was too much for him, too."

Obi-Wan was quiet for a moment, thinking. "What happened to Norval?" he finally asked.

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A tortured look came into Dedra's eyes. "I don't know," she said mournfully. "But the best I can hope for is that he is dead."

Chapter Sixteen

Anakin's eyes widened. That was a terrible thing to say. Even when he was a slave as a young boy on Tatooine, he never wished that his life would end. Death seemed so permanent, so final.

"We didn't know then that Norval had been obsessively studying Dr. Lundi's texts," Dedra explained quickly, seeing the reactions of the Jedi. "He'd developed a taste for power, and he desperately wanted it. The teachings had changed him."

Anakin wasn't sure he understood what Dedra meant. He knew what it was like to want something badly. He'd wanted to win a Podrace on Tatooine. He wanted to free his mother. He wanted to become a Jedi. But he didn't think these desires actually changed him. They were simply part of who he was.

Nobody said anything for several moments. Anakin sensed that his Master was taking everything in, trying to put all the information in place in his mind.

Suddenly the silence in the kitchen was broken by the sound of Omal's voice. He was mumbling something in the other room. His words were not clear, but the tone was desperate. A look of concern crossed Dedra's face and she moved toward the living room.

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"I'll go check on him," Anakin offered. He left Obi-Wan and Dedra in the small kitchen and headed back into the living room. Omal was still sitting on the floor, but his head was now sharply tilted to the side. Tears were running down the side of his face, and his nose was watery.

Anakin stared at Omal for a long moment. He felt sorry for him, and wished there was something he could do to help him. If what his Master said was true, Omal had been horribly and permanently changed.

"You're okay," Anakin said gently, snapping out of his thoughts. "We just need to get your face cleaned up." He found a small scrap of relatively clean cloth and used it to wipe Omal's face. Omal looked up at him gratefully for a brief moment. Then his eyes darted away again and he resumed rocking back and forth.

Anakin watched Omal for what seemed like an eternity. When he finally looked away, he felt a strong desire to move ahead with the mission. He had to know what had caused Omal's downfall – what had the Jedi Council so up in arms.

He wanted to do it now – to get out of the apartment, get going. Dedra had told them everything she knew, and Omal was clearly not going to tell them anything at all. What was Obi-Wan still doing in the kitchen? Was there a reason it was taking him so long?

Feeling antsy, Anakin began to look around the living room. Piles of dirty clothes, scraps of food, and all kinds of other items were littered across the floor. None of them looked particularly interesting or important.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Anakin spotted something shiny sticking out from under a tunic. Picking it up, he saw that it was a small holoprojector. Anakin tried to switch it on, but knew almost immediately that it was broken.

From his spot on the floor, Omal began to moan softly. "No, Norval. No," he repeated.

Anakin barely heard him. He loved mechanical things, and couldn't resist tinkering a tiny bit with the projector. He pulled a tool from his utility belt and started to fiddle. But the projector was jammed.

"Blast!" Anakin exclaimed. He was surprised by his own frustration. He usually loved this kind of challenge.

Anakin was about to toss the faulty projector aside when he pressed the right sequence and it suddenly came to life. At first the image was fuzzy, and Anakin had a hard time making it out. Then, as he began to realize what he was looking at, his mouth gaped open.

It was an image of a Jedi Knight being brutally murdered.

Anakin stood frozen, staring at the image. Behind him, Omal's moaning was getting louder. Finally the sound got through to Anakin, and he tried to switch the projector off. Only now it was jammed on and didn't shut down.

The murder played again, and again. The Ithorian Jedi raised his lightsaber – but was hit from behind by a bolt from a blaster. The Jedi crumpled to the ground, dead.

Anakin's heart began to race. He tried not to look at the image, but something seemed to be holding his eyes to it. And something about what he was looking at felt familiar. It was as if he had seen it before and knew it, somehow. Anakin began to feel ill.

Anakin forced his repair tool into the bottom of the projector and the image disappeared. He tossed the machine back onto the floor and turned away. His hands shook slightly and his knees felt wobbly. Omal's moans gave voice to what Anakin was feeling.

Anakin took a deep breath and tried to clear his head. He knew messages of this sort were being sent around the galaxy, of course. He'd been at the briefing with the Jedi Council and had been told all about them. But he hadn't actually expected to see one. He wasn't prepared.

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And now that awful image had been implanted in his mind. Anakin looked over at Omal. He stopped moaning, but his eyes darted back and forth between Anakin and the broken holoprojector on the floor.

Anakin was about to approach him when Obi-Wan came rushing into the living room with Dedra behind him. "I just got a call from the ship," he said. "It seems Dr. Lundi has decided to talk again. And the pilot thinks there are vandals lurking around the hangar. He's threatening to leave Lundi and take off."

Anakin felt relief wash through him and realized just how unsettled he was by Omal's apartment and the projector's message. He wanted to get out of there, and right that second was none too soon.

"Did you tell him to hold tight?" Anakin asked, gratefully following Obi-Wan to the door.

Obi-Wan nodded. "But I'm not sure how long he'll wait for us. He's been a little jittery since we left Coruscant."

"You can say that again," Anakin said. "The guy has no backbone."

The Jedi said good-bye to Omal and Dedra and hurried back to the ship. Anakin knew that he should tell his Master about the projector and the message, but for some reason didn't want to. It was strange, but he felt guilty about it. It was as if he were somehow responsible for the message, for what happened in it.

But that makes no sense at all, Anakin thought. *I don't even know who those people are. Or were.*

Hurrying after his Master, Anakin decided not to say anything. Obi-Wan seemed distracted, and it wasn't as if the existence of the message was new information. He would tell him later, when the time was right.

Chapter Seventeen

"I'll check out the exterior of the ship to make sure there hasn't been any sabotage," Anakin said once they were inside the hangar.

Obi-Wan smiled. He knew his Padawan would rather investigate something mechanical than do just about anything else.

"Okay," he said. "I'll head inside and talk to the captain – and Lundi."

Obi-Wan hurried up the ship's ramp and into the cockpit.

"It's about time," the pilot said, though Obi-Wan thought he seemed relieved to see him. "He's been rambling for the last half hour." He pointed nervously to the hold, where Lundi sat in his cage. "Something about an ancient device that's calling to him. And the tides."

"Thanks," Obi-Wan said, turning toward the hold. He took a deep breath. He wanted this conversation – if that was what it would be – to go well. He *needed* it to go well.

"I've just been to see Dedra and Omal," Obi-Wan said calmly. He watched Lundi closely for some sort of reaction to the names, but didn't see one. Lundi simply glared at him through the dark slit that was his visible eye.

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Disappointed, Obi-Wan pushed on. "They had some interesting things to say about Norval."

This time Obi-Wan got a reaction. Only it wasn't one he was expecting. The professor smiled evilly, his decaying, yellow teeth showing themselves. The expression appeared frozen on his face. No matter how he tried, Obi-Wan couldn't figure out what the smile meant.

Obi-Wan felt frustration again. Lundi was like a blank wall. Though he was weaker than when Obi-Wan had first seen him ten years ago on Coruscant, his mind was a puzzle. Obi-Wan could not access his thoughts, even with the Force. How could he determine who was seeking the Holocron if the Quermian wouldn't cooperate?

"Norval was on Kodai with you," Obi-Wan said in a loud voice. The echo it made in the hold surprised both him and Lundi, who looked up. Obi-Wan suddenly thought he might have found a way through the professor's wall.

"As was Omal. You were all after the Holocron together."

Lundi leaned forward, as if about to speak. His face was pressed against the bars of his cage. But a moment later he sat back again, smiling smugly.

"You had the knowledge, but you needed these children to do your dirty work. To actually get it for you. You didn't think you could dive that deep alone..."

Obi-Wan desperately waited for Lundi to jump in, to begin talking, to object to what he was saying. But the professor seemed to know that was exactly what Obi-Wan wanted. He sat there like a stone, all of his long arms folded across his chest. His face was contorted into a defiant sneer.

Obi-Wan suddenly felt the urge to break through the cage's bars and rip the sneer right off Lundi's face. Even insane and locked in a cage, the Quermian had power. And at that moment, Obi-Wan hated that power with every fiber of his being.

"We need to know if the Holocron is still in the crater!" he shouted. "We need to get to it before –"

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Obi-Wan stopped himself. In his anger, he'd almost blurted out dangerous information. Having been locked up for the last ten years,

Lundi wouldn't know that the Sith had actually returned. He wouldn't know that others in the galaxy possessed the knowledge he'd sought....

Lundi's tiny head tilted to one side. "You are afraid, boy. But not of my students," he said, leaning forward again. "No...there's something more. Something much bigger, much more horrifying." He spoke slowly, as if he wanted to make sure Obi-Wan caught every word. "The Sith," he said, sitting back again. His eye widened and Obi-Wan could see his large, black pupil. "You are afraid of the Sith, of their return."

Lundi sat back and cackled loudly. "You should be," he said.

Obi-Wan gazed steadily at Lundi. He knew the professor wanted him to say something, to acknowledge his fear. He wouldn't give him that satisfaction.

The hold was completely silent for several long minutes as the two stared at each other. Finally, Lundi spoke.

"I can tell you where the Holocron is," he said, sounding remarkably lucid. "I can even tell you how to get it. The question is, what can you do for me in return?"

Chapter Eighteen

Anakin circled the ship for the third time. He hadn't seen anything unusual and was beginning to think that the captain was just being paranoid. Given his personality, it certainly seemed possible. And, Anakin had to admit, hanging around with Dr. Lundi could be unsettling for anyone.

Satisfied that nothing was amiss, he headed into the vessel. Obi-Wan was on the bridge programming the Kodai coordinates into the navsystem.

"We're heading to Kodai immediately," he said. Anakin was relieved to be leaving the planet and moving ahead. His Master, too, seemed pleased.

"The professor finally confirmed that the Holocron is still in its undersea vault."

Anakin wrinkled his nose. "He could be lying," he pointed out.

Obi-Wan sighed. "I know," he admitted. "He might be trying to put us in danger. Or he could be toying with us. But it is the only information we have to go on, and my instinct is telling me that we should trust it. Besides, we only have the short time during the low tide to check."

Anakin nodded. He was feeling better about the hologram message now that they were about to leave the planet. Perhaps it was a good time to tell Obi-Wan about it.

"Master," he began. "I found some – "

"I'm telling you, somebody was out there," the pilot said, interrupting him. "Someone was messing with my ship."

Anakin rolled his eyes before turning to the captain. The guy was beginning to get on his nerves.

"I checked everything out," Anakin said reassuringly. "Everything looked just fine."

The captain looked doubtful but didn't reply as the ship took off. Soon they could only see the blackness of space through the cockpit view- screen. The captain prepared for hyperspace.

Anakin suddenly felt tired and was grateful for a bit of downtime. The trip to Kodai would take more than a day, so he'd have a little while to rest and collect his thoughts.

Suddenly there was a loud explosion on the engine side, and the ship rocked hard to the left.

"I told you!" the captain screamed. "Someone has sabotaged my ship. We have to land immediately!"

"We can't," Obi-Wan said rationally. "That is exactly what the saboteurs would want us to do."

The captain's eyes went wide. "But we can't fly like this," he said, his voice rising while smoke poured into the cockpit from the rear of the ship. "My controls are useless. We'll all die."

Anakin felt annoyance rise in him again. But this time it was mixed with a sense of guilt. Someone *had* obviously tampered with the ship, in spite of the fact that he initially didn't believe the captain's concerns.

"Nobody is going to die," Anakin said calmly. "Just show me where you keep your tools."

The captain pointed to a small cupboard right outside the cockpit. Anakin retrieved the kit and moved to the back of the ship, waving his hands to clear the smoke. The flames had been extinguished by automatic fire controls and the damaged engine

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was accessible through a large hatch in a rear corridor. Though Anakin could fix it, it would not be easy while the ship was in motion.

Anakin opened the hatch and saw immediately that the circuitry bay had been fused. That meant that several circuits needed to be re-placed – and fast. The question was, which ones? Some were trivial, and others would repair the ship enough for it to fly to Kodai.

Anakin was not particularly familiar with the kind of ship they were on. He'd never flown one before, and certainly never repaired one. He'd have to follow his instincts.

Pulling out a light energy tool, he got to work on the circuitry wires. It was difficult to hold the tool steady, since the ship was banking in all directions. Working carefully, he reconnected the damaged wires one by one. Soon the ship stabilized, and the pilot once again had control.

Anakin repaired a few more wires and closed the hatch. On his way back to the cockpit he passed Lundi's cage.

"Nice work, young one," the professor said. "I could have used you on Kodai."

Anakin tried to ignore the comment as he replaced the tools in the cupboard. The Quermian was loony, and said crazy things all the time.

"Good job, Padawan," Obi-Wan said proudly as Anakin entered the cockpit.

"We can make it to Kodai now," the captain said. "Though it may take a bit longer than originally scheduled."

The relief in the cockpit was palpable. They were all safe – for the moment.

Chapter Nineteen

Obi-Wan studied his Padawan as he put away the tool kit. He was relieved that he'd fixed the engine, of course. But as he watched his apprentice, Obi-Wan also experienced another feeling – worry.

When Obi-Wan had started this mission with Qui-Gon ten years earlier, he'd been troubled by the dark side. He'd felt frustrated, vulnerable, and afraid.

Anakin did not appear to be feeling any of these things. No, it was something else.

Obi-Wan saw the boy walk up to Lundi's cage and stare at the Quermian. He did not show any fear. Instead he seemed... fascinated.

His Padawan was extremely curious about Lundi and what had turned him into an insane criminal. In fact, he seemed drawn toward the power that had corrupted Lundi and Omal.

This curiosity worried Obi-Wan.

Of course Anakin had not seen the power of the dark side the way that Obi-Wan had. He had not witnessed his Master being cut down by a Sith Lord. He had not been nearly killed himself.

After such a close experience Obi-Wan was well aware of the threat the Sith posed if they regained all of their ancient power. And recapturing the knowledge contained in a Sith Holocron

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would be a large step in that direction. It could be devastating for the entire galaxy.

Obi-Wan shuddered at the thought before letting it fade to the back of his mind. He needed to sharpen his focus and bring his attention back to the moment, and his Padawan.

The boy needed guidance, Obi-Wan knew. A decade earlier, his own Master had skillfully led him in the right direction – away from anger and frustration. It had kept Obi-Wan firmly on the Jedi path. When Qui-Gon died, Obi-Wan had promised to give that guidance to Anakin.

Obi-Wan remembered Anakin's angry outburst at Lundi when they were first on the ship. Anger was dangerous. Perhaps he should be warning his apprentice about the dark side – that it was an easy path to power, but also to self-destruction.

The problem was, he did not know how to put the words together. He did not know exactly what to say. And whenever he offered Anakin this kind of guidance, the boy brushed it aside. It was almost as if Anakin thought that the things Obi-Wan was trying to warn him about did not apply to him.

With a sigh, Obi-Wan wished that Qui-Gon were still alive. He would know just what to say, what to do. He would be able to get through to Anakin.

"I think we're being followed," the pilot said after they came out of hyperspace, breaking into Obi-Wan's thoughts.

Obi-Wan rose and approached the controls. It was not unlikely, he realized. Whoever sabotaged the ship could easily be on their tail.

Obi-Wan carefully searched the ship's detection system. He found nothing.

Soon they landed safely on Kodai. After instructing the pilot not to leave the planet, Obi-Wan led Anakin downtown.

"We need to get to the water soon," Obi-Wan explained as they made their way up the main street. The tide was already going out, but they weren't going to wait for it to hit its lowest point. If they did, they might be too late; they had to beat

Norval, or whoever was after the Holocron. This time they had to get there first.

Anakin looked around. "There's not much here, is there?" he asked.

"No," Obi-Wan replied. "There was a huge tidal wave several hundred years ago, and many Kodaians were killed. Most of the survivors fled the planet. Those who remain await another giant wave, and in their minds, certain death."

Anakin grimaced. "That's pretty bad," he said.

Obi-Wan laughed. "I agree, Padawan." Then his expression grew serious. "I would not choose to live my life in such a way. But the Kodaians did not choose, either. It would be difficult to have a history of loss."

Anakin was thoughtful as they scoured the town. "You'd think there'd be diving shops everywhere," he finally said. "Practically the whole planet is sea."

"True. But the people are afraid of it," Obi-Wan reminded him.

"They seem afraid of us, too," Anakin said. "Whenever we pass someone, they move more quickly and look away."

"You are observant, Anakin," Obi-Wan said proudly. "Kodaians do not feel comfortable around strangers."

After checking the tide and finding it was not yet the right time to dive, the Jedi made their way back to the ship. Many Kodaians went out of their way to avoid them on the streets. Others stopped to stare at them. And a few shouted warnings about the deadly sea and its hidden evils.

"Master," Anakin suddenly said. His voice was quiet, almost hesitant. This was unusual for the boy. "I have something to tell you."

Obi-Wan stopped and turned toward his Padawan. "What is it?" he asked.

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"I found a holoprojector when we were at Omal's apartment. It...it had a message on it, one of the messages Master Ki-Adi Mundi told us about. "

Obi-Wan's eyes widened. "A message showing a Jedi being killed?" he asked.

Anakin nodded.

For a moment Obi-Wan did not know how to respond. This was important information – not something an apprentice should keep from his Master.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he asked in a raised voice.

"I... I didn't think it was important," Anakin mumbled. "We already knew the messages existed, and you wanted to get back to the ship."

Obi-Wan stared at his Padawan. He never would have considered keeping this kind of information from Qui-Gon. As a Jedi team, it was essential that they share every piece of knowledge they gathered. They had to trust each other. Completely.

With a jolt, Obi-Wan realized that Anakin might not totally trust him. Why else would he keep something like this from him?

As Obi-Wan stared down at his Padawan learner, an awful thought crept into his mind: He wasn't sure he completely trusted Anakin, either.

"You should have told me immediately," Obi-Wan said sternly. "Be sure that you do so next time."

Anakin looked down at his feet. "Yes, Master," he said.

Without another word, Obi-Wan turned away and continued down the street.

The Jedi were silent as they walked back to the ship. Inside, Dr. Lundi was asleep in his cage, his loud snores filling the hold. He woke abruptly when the Jedi entered.

"Can't a prisoner get some sleep around here?" he grumbled, wiping a line of drool off his chin with one hand and rubbing his eye with another.

"Not when he has agreed to provide important information," Obi-Wan replied flatly. "I need you to answer some questions about your last journey to the bottom of the Kodaian sea. It's time for you to tell us what you know."

The professor glared at Obi-Wan for several long seconds. It was true that he had agreed to answer questions in exchange for the chance to look upon the Holocron once more. "Go on," he finally said.

"Ten years ago you came to Kodai to go after the Holocron," Obi-Wan said. "And one of your star pupils came after you."

"Norval," Lundi said, nodding. "He *was* my star pupil. Had such a hunger for knowledge."

"Dark knowledge," Obi-Wan noted, looking pointedly at Dr. Lundi.

Lundi shrugged. "It is not my responsibility how the boy used what he learned. I was only the teacher. I simply passed the information along."

Lundi's casual response made Obi-Wan angry. He obviously took his powerful position as a teacher very lightly. Didn't he understand the effect he had on people? Didn't he know he was responsible for the destruction of at least one young life?

"But Norval was strong – stronger than even I knew," Lundi went on. "He got to the Holocron first. He brought it up still inside its vault. We fought over it, and it fell into the geyser crater."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes as disappointment surged inside him. Though he'd known that the Holocron could have fallen deeper into the pocketed seafloor, he'd hoped it wasn't true. It meant that the Holocron was *very* far down.

And located inside a gushing geyser that was incredibly treacherous, even at the lowest tide. The Holocron could easily be so far down that no one would be able to retrieve it. But what if it wasn't?

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Obi-Wan was not feeling confident about anything on this mission. Yet he had no choice but to move forward – before someone else did.

Chapter Twenty

Anakin squinted into the darkness as the loaded gravsled zoomed over the exposed sea-floor. The tide was already partially out, and soon they would be traveling over the water.

"That way," Obi-Wan said, pointing off to the left. They were the first words he'd spoken to him since their argument. Anakin felt badly about not telling his Master about the hologram message sooner, but wasn't sure why it was such a big deal. He did tell him, didn't he?

Anakin turned the vehicle. Beside him, Dr. Lundi was staring through the bars of his portable cage. His eyes were wide, and he couldn't sit still. He seemed like an excited child.

He can't wait to see the Holocron, Anakin thought. The ancient artifact had quite a reputation to live up to. As he increased the gravsled's speed, the young Jedi secretly hoped that it would.

The gravsled zoomed over the water, heading straight toward the crater. Anakin thought he saw something sticking up above the shallow sea. It looked like a diving platform.

"Just ahead," Obi-Wan said. Anakin could hear the disappointment in his Master's voice. He pulled the gravsled up beside a platform piled with equipment and cut the engine.

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Obi-Wan stared down at the water suit and air tank. "Someone has already been here," he said. "I only hope they haven't found the Holocron."

Anakin scanned the surface of the sea. He could feel a powerful, dark energy surrounding them. But he wasn't sure if it was because the Holocron was still below, or because it had been there for years.

"The Holocron is gone," Lundi cackled. He waved his arms, smacking several against the top and sides of his travel cage. "He came back. Norval's got it."

Obi-Wan pulled on his breather and gestured for Anakin to do the same. In spite of Lundi's words, the Jedi couldn't leave this time until they were certain that the Holocron was not still under the sea. After checking to make sure that

Lundi's cage was anchored securely to the gravsled, they dove into the water.

Obi-Wan led the way down the side of the crater to the rocky shelf below. It was a long way down and Anakin felt a surge of excitement as they dropped lower and lower. *This* was a mission.

Once they were on the shelf, it was easy to locate the geyser – a huge mass of hot water gushed out of it every several minutes. That didn't leave them much time to investigate what was below.

Anakin dove down into the crater after his Master, kicking as hard as he could. There was nothing in front of him except the inky blackness of the deep sea. He could barely see his Master's legs moving back and forth just a few meters in front of his face. At last Obi-Wan lit a glow rod.

Down, down, down they swam. Anakin's ears popped several times from the pressure, and the water got warmer and warmer.

After what seemed like several minutes, Anakin caught a glimpse of a sinister red glow several meters in front of them, rising from the seafloor. His breath caught in his throat as he came to a halt. The water here seemed to pulsate with energy, and he had to concentrate to stay in one place. The same appeared to be true for his Master.

Obi-Wan gestured for Anakin to stay put and cautiously swam forward toward a glowing vault. Anakin saw his legs move back and forth, then stop. Obi-Wan thrust his glow rod into the tomblike box. It was empty. A second later Obi-Wan had turned around and was pointing up. He wanted Anakin to head back to the surface.

Anakin wondered how long they'd been down there. Five minutes? Six? There wasn't much time before the geyser would blow again.

Turning around as quickly as he could, he bolted for the surface. But swimming up was not easy. It almost felt as if something was holding him down, keeping him in the geyser. Kicking hard, he moved slowly upward.

Anakin's legs were aching when he felt a small gush of warm water rush past him. With a series of furious kicks, he surged ahead. He did not want to be anywhere nearby when the geyser erupted.

Finally the geyser walls disappeared and the Jedi were once again in open water. Sprinting forward, they moved away from the geyser mouth just as a giant burst of scalding water shot out.

The Jedi wasted no time getting back to the gravsled. Now that they knew the Holocron was not there, they had to get back to civilization as soon as possible.

Anakin pulled off his breather and started the gravsled. They were practically moving when Obi-Wan climbed out of the water.

"It was gone," Lundi declared, looking at the Jedi's empty hands. "Clever. The boy is clever – more clever than I thought. I should have suspected. Yes, suspected. He almost had it the last time, he did. Until Omal got in his way. Lucky for me. Unlucky for him. Omal gave me a chance to attack – to get the Holocron for myself. But Norval was a formidable opponent. I have to hand it to him..."

Lundi's voice trailed off as he lost himself in the ten-year-old memory.

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"Where would Norval take the Holocron?" Obi-Wan asked.

Professor Lundi crossed several arms across his chest. "A deal, a deal," he said defiantly. "We had our deal. I told you secrets for a chance to see the Holocron. But I didn't see it, did I? The game is up, up, up. And you lost. The boy has the Holocron. The boy. Ha!"

Anger swelled inside Anakin. He waited for his Master to do something, to shake some sense into the old loon. But Obi-Wan was silent as he stared glumly at the professor.

Wearing a sinister smirk, Lundi looked from Anakin to Obi-Wan. "Though I doubt the boy actually knows what to do with it," he added under his breath. "But at least he's not cowardly like you and the rest of your robed friends."

That's it. Anakin switched off the gravsled and lunged at the professor. He could smell the old Quermian's rancid breath as he leaned in close to his face.

"This isn't funny, wormhead," he said furiously. "Your boy may not know what to do with the Holocron, but the Sith will."

The smile disappeared from Professor Lundi's face as he stared back at Anakin. He dropped all of his gangly arms to his sides.

"I suspect you know your history, professor," Anakin shouted, forcing the Quermian's long neck farther and farther back. "And that you're well aware if the Sith gain power it's not just the Jedi who will die."

Chapter Twenty-One

Obi-Wan looked back and forth between Anakin and Dr. Lundi. He knew that Anakin's outburst was not appropriate. It was not the Jedi way, and Anakin seemed to let anger overtake him too easily. Obi-Wan could still see a flicker of fury in his eyes. As his Master, it was his duty to reprimand the boy for his behavior. To counsel him about the danger of negative emotions.

But the outburst seemed to have an effect on Lundi. For the first time since they'd left Coruscant, the professor appeared cowed. The young Jedi had actually managed to intimidate Professor Lundi. For this Obi-Wan was grateful.

Obi-Wan watched his Padawan return to the controls and start the gravsled engine.

He is so different from me, he thought. *Our relationship is so different from the one I shared with Qui-Gon.*

Of course with Anakin, Obi-Wan was no longer the Padawan. He was the Master, and it was his job to lead, to teach. He often found himself wondering if he was ready for this awesome responsibility. It had all happened so fast – one day he was a Padawan learner himself, and the next he was Anakin's Master. He could not help but feel that it was really a role for Qui-Gon.

Like Qui-Gon, Anakin had a tendency to break the rules. He often chose to follow his instincts instead of the Jedi code. But

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his decisions, while sometimes rash, almost always got results. They almost always put the mission a step ahead, and often left Obi-Wan at odds.

This is not the time for a reprimand, Obi-Wan thought as they sped back toward shore. They had to get to the hangar before Norval rounded up transport and left the planet altogether.

Within a few minutes the gravsled was at the hangar. But their hired ship and its pilot were nowhere to be seen.

"He's fled," Obi-Wan said, grimly looking around the hangar.

"That coward," Anakin said with disgust. "I never should have fixed his ship. The next time I see him –"

"We don't have time to deal with that now," Obi-Wan interrupted. "Let's find out who has left the planet in the last few hours and see if we can track them."

After securing the still-silent Lundi's cage to a hangar wall, Obi-Wan and Anakin split up to search the hangar. Obi-Wan had seen Norval ten years earlier, and had described him to his Padawan. But aside from an average-sized young man with dark hair, they didn't have much to go on.

The hangar was not particularly busy, and none of the pilots Obi-Wan approached had seen Norval – or at least they said they hadn't seen him. If they said anything at all. Disappointed, Obi-Wan decided to check the hangar records.

Only one ship had left in the last few hours. It was headed toward the Ploo Sector. But no planet was specified.

"Did you find anything?" Anakin asked as he approached his Master. "Nobody would talk to me."

"Just this," Obi-Wan said, tossing Anakin the records. It seemed that the Holocron had eluded him a second time. Trying to find a mystery ship in a vast sector was a long shot, and it was all they had to go on.

"Why would he go to the Ploo Sector?" Anakin asked.

Several meters away, Lundi stuck his narrow head through the bars of his cage. "Norval was a good student. A great one. In fact the only thing that surpassed his desire for knowledge and power

was his greed." Dr. Lundi stood up as straight as he could inside his cage. "I was offered vast riches by several anonymous parties to turn over the Sith Holocron should I ever capture it. One of the parties wanted to rendezvous beside my home planet of Ploo II."

The Jedi exchanged glances. Should they believe him? Lundi had several reasons to thwart their progress. He probably enjoyed the idea of Norval having the Holocron, of his using it for his own evil uses. He would take pride in that. Norval was, after all, Lundi's prize student.

But for the first time Obi-Wan felt he had some insight into Lundi's thoughts. It was as if a wall had been torn down, and Obi-Wan sensed that the professor was telling the truth. The Quermian wanted to go after the Holocron himself. He wanted a chance to see it again, to be close to its power.

"We need a ship to get us to Ploo II," Obi-Wan said. "Quickly."

Chapter Twenty-Two

According to the flight records, the ship that left for the Ploo Sector was very large and not particularly fast. Anakin knew that if they were going to catch it, they'd need a fast vehicle with a powerful hyperdrive.

There was only one such ship in the hangar. The pilot looked at the Jedi warily as they approached.

"Ploo II?" he repeated with disdain. "No thanks. I just got here, and won't be doing anything but taking a nice long rest."

"I can pilot," Anakin said. "You can even stay here and rest. We'll bring the ship back when we're finished."

The pilot looked at Anakin as if he were crazy. Anakin couldn't blame him. If it were his ship, he wouldn't let some stranger take it off planet, either. Not even a Jedi.

But they needed the ship. Badly.

Obi-Wan waved his hand in front of the pilot's face. "You can trust us to borrow the ship," he said slowly.

"I guess I can trust you to borrow the ship," the pilot said.

"We will bring it back when we are finished," Obi-Wan added.

"Just bring it back when you are finished," the pilot echoed.

Anakin grinned. They weren't lightsabers, but Jedi mind tricks really came in handy sometimes.

"I'll get Lundi," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin nodded and boarded the ship. From the pilot's seat he plugged in the coordinates for Ploo II. Minutes later Obi-Wan and Lundi were on board, and the ship was heading into the atmosphere.

Anakin thought he might have a chance to talk to Obi-Wan on the way, but Obi-Wan silently left the cockpit shortly after they had taken off. Anakin guessed that he was still upset.

Trying not to think about it, Anakin studied the computer's programmed hyperdrive route. If there was a faster way to get there, he wanted to know about it. They had to catch the Holocron thief.

There appeared to be only one direct route, and the computer had chosen it. Anakin engaged the hyperdrive, and the nearby stars streaked by in flashes of blinding light.

Once the ship was safely in hyperspace, Anakin could step away from the controls and relax a bit. Moving into the hold, he saw that the professor was sound asleep. He'd been sleeping a lot lately, and as Anakin studied him he appeared older and more frail. His body shuddered with every breath. It seemed as if his life forces were ebbing.

Asleep and helpless in his cage, the professor seemed more pitiful than threatening. Anakin almost felt sorry for him. But then, the Quermian had not made this mission an easy one. He had been difficult from the start, and the way he'd treated his Master had infuriated Anakin.

Now, under his direction, they were chasing a ship on its way to Ploo II. Was it the right planet, or were they simply on a fruitless chase? It would be so easy for Lundi to lead them astray. After being locked up by Jedi for ten years, it was entirely possible that he was out for revenge. Anakin couldn't really blame him for wanting to take his imprisonment out on someone.

Anakin watched Lundi sleep for a long time and tried to meditate. He was left with many questions about Dr. Lundi and the Holocron.

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But he didn't think that the professor was lying to them about following Norval. Anakin sensed that they were closing in on something powerful and evil... and believed it to be the Holocron.

Anakin got to his feet and moved toward the pilot's seat. It was almost time to bring the ship out of hyperspace. Sitting down at the controls, he suddenly felt a ripple in the Force. He quickly brought the ship out of lightspeed. The familiar starriness of space came into view around him.

But that was not the only thing Anakin saw.

Obi-Wan was beside him in an instant. "I felt a wave in the Force," he said.

Anakin pointed to a sleek gray ship visible in the viewscreen.

"It just passed us," he said.

"Whose ship is it?" Anakin asked, wide-eyed.

Obi-Wan sighed. "I don't know," he confessed. "But I have a feeling we'd better get to Norval's ship before it does."

The large ship shuddered. Anakin had been pushing it hard since they'd sighted the sleek gray vessel, and wasn't sure how much longer it would hold up. The speed they were flying at was certainly faster than the craft was accustomed to. By the time they landed somewhere it would probably need repairs.

The mysterious gray ship was now in front of them and had slowed down.

Anakin's Master stood beside him with his eyes closed. "I feel something powerful, but it could be coming from that ship and not the Holocron. We've got to locate Norval quickly. I have a hunch that whoever is aboard that ship is after the Holocron too.

"I'll keep an eye out," Anakin assured his Master. "Why don't you prepare a shuttle. When I find his ship you can be ready to board immediately."

Obi-Wan nodded at Anakin gratefully. "Monitor all ship-to-ship communications and let me know if you sense anything unusual."

While Obi-Wan prepared a shuttle, Anakin carefully circled the gray ship in a wide arc.

Anakin was just coming around the gray ship when another, larger ship came into view in the space lane. Anakin felt instantly certain that it was Norval's. There was a strange flutter in his stomach, like nausea.

Anakin switched on his comlink. "I see another ship," he reported. "And I'm feeling kind of weird. I'll bet the Holocron is in there."

"Good. I'm closing the shuttle hatch now," Obi-Wan said. "Activate the shuttle bay doors immediately."

Anakin pressed a button on his control panel and Obi-Wan's shuttle shot out of the ship. It looked tiny as it hurtled toward Norval's massive vessel. Anakin hoped it would land safely on Norval's ship without being detected by the mysterious gray craft.

As Anakin watched the shuttle approach Norval's ship, a voice spoke up behind him. Lundi.

"Too late, too late," he murmured.

Anakin turned around and saw that Lundi's eyes were closed. Was he asleep, or awake?

Too late for what? Anakin wondered.

He didn't have long to ponder. Just then a huge blast rocked the ship.

Chapter Twenty-Three

From the small window in the tiny shuttle, Obi-Wan saw a red blast explode against Anakin's ship. The gray vessel had finally detected their ship and was clearly not pleased about its presence.

The sight of the red laser triggered something in Obi-Wan's memory, and a familiar feeling of helplessness washed over him. But there was no way he could get back to the ship fast enough to help his Padawan. And there was the Holocron. He had to go after it while he had the chance. He would not leave it behind again.

Obi-Wan quickly sent a mental message to his Padawan. *You can do it, Anakin*, he told him. *Just think carefully...*

Within minutes the shuttle locked into the docking bay on Norval's ship. After powering down the tiny craft, Obi-Wan quietly slipped out into the bigger ship.

As he moved down a glistening white corridor, the sound of more laser fire echoed in Obi-Wan's ears. Anakin's ship was getting pounded. Obi-Wan suddenly wished he and his Padawan had resolved their discussion on Kodai.

You can't do anything about that now, he told himself. He had to focus and think clearly if he was going to find the Holocron on this giant craft.

Obi-Wan hurried down several sterile corridors. As he reached the end of one he suddenly felt something evil washing over him. He knew exactly how his Padawan had felt a few minutes earlier. The Holocron was close.

Obi-Wan rounded a corner and spotted a large room at the end of the passageway. A humanoid figure stood with its back to the door, waiting. And there, on a transparisteel table, sat the glowing red Holocron.

Obi-Wan approached the room carefully. But before he was through the door the figure turned toward him.

"I have been waiting for you," Norval said.

Obi-Wan focused hard on the dark-haired man in front of him as queasiness threatened to overtake him. He sensed that, in fact, he *wasn't* the person Norval had been waiting for. He'd been expecting someone else – Lundi, perhaps. Or whoever was piloting the sleek gray ship.

"Powerful, isn't it?" Norval cackled. "The nauseous feeling takes some getting used to. When you are comfortable with the power, it disappears."

Obi-Wan dove for the Holocron, but Norval quickly stepped in front of it.

"This information would be wasted in the hands of the Jedi," he spat. "You have no idea what to do with power."

Obi-Wan could see that Norval was not going to give up without a fight. Reaching down to his utility belt, he unhooked and ignited his light-saber.

I must end this quickly, Obi-Wan thought. He hoped the sight of his lightsaber would make Norval back down and hand over the Holocron. *I must get back to help Anakin before it is too late.*

But Norval did not back down. He simply reached for his belt and ignited a lightsaber of his own.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Anakin unleashed another round of laser fire. He'd been circling the sleek gray ship, pummeling its hull. Every blast appeared to find its quick-moving target. But they didn't seem to have any effect.

I should have chosen a ship with decent firepower as well as speed, Anakin thought grimly. *I should have known I'd need to be prepared for battle.*

Anakin had taken several hits without sustaining much damage. Only that first firing had created a problem, and losing the hyperdrive was minor compared to what could have been damaged.

Still, the ship could be hit again at any moment – and with dire results. He had to get out of there. But where could he go? The large gray craft clearly had a long firing range. It would take several minutes to get far enough away to be safe....

Thinking fast, Anakin turned the ship around and headed straight for Norval's behemoth. If he could just keep the giant vessel between him and the mystery ship, he'd count on the gray ship not firing on him. The pilot wouldn't want to risk the Holocron – he hoped.

Anakin breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that the gray ship was not coming after him. But before he could inhale again

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it turned its fire on Norval's ship. Somehow, the pilot knew the Jedi were getting close.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Obi-Wan gaped at the lightsaber in Norval's hand for half a second. Such a weapon was extremely difficult to construct, and doing so took patience and skill. Attributes he wasn't at all convinced that Norval had.

Norval stepped forward, his blade raised. He was clearly pleased to see the look of surprise on Obi-Wan's face.

"You Jedi think you are the only ones who can wield lightsabers?" he laughed menacingly. "Dr. Lundi's lessons only took me so far. But the Quermian did help me gather the tools I needed. It's actually quite simple, once you have the knowledge – and the power..."

Obi-Wan was barely listening. He circled Norval, carefully studying the lightsaber. Its construction was crude, and he guessed that the crystals inside were weak and badly tuned. At least he hoped that was the case.

Norval brought the weapon high over his head, then thrust it back down. It missed Obi-Wan by several centimeters and crashed into the table where the Holocron rested. The glowing artifact tumbled to the floor. Both Obi-Wan and Norval watched the Holocron fall, but neither made a move for it.

His lightsaber might be crude, but it is still deadly, Obi-Wan noted. He knew from experience that a powerful weapon could be even

more dangerous in the hands of an unskilled user. He would have to tread carefully.

Norval's eyes glinted. "Did the Jedi like my messages?" he asked, moving slowly forward. "I thought they were appropriate. Imagine being able to bring down the pathetic Jedi and get rich doing it!"

Norval slashed at the air, his fury building. It was clear to Obi-Wan that the young man was strong, but not very technically advanced with the lightsaber.

Obi-Wan sprang ahead, slashing with his own blue blade and pushing Norval backward. He had no desire to kill Norval – he simply wanted to disarm him and take the Holocron. This fight was wasting valuable time.

Obi-Wan closed in. But before he could knock Norval's lightsaber out of his hands, another explosion caused the ship to bank sharply. Obi-Wan fell backward, losing his grip on his lightsaber and hitting his head hard on the floor.

It was some seconds before his vision cleared. When it did, Norval was standing over him. Obi-Wan could feel the heat from the glowing lightsaber blade, which was trained on his throat.

"You didn't think I could actually get the Holocron, did you?" he gloated. "Nobody did. If only Omal hadn't interfered the first time, I would be even stronger now – and you and Dr. Lundi would be long dead."

Obi-Wan pretended to listen as Norval ranted. The longer he talked, the more time he'd have to formulate some sort of plan. Once Norval decided to strike, Obi-Wan would be out of time – perhaps permanently.

Out of the corner of his eye Obi-Wan saw his lightsaber rolling away from him. Beyond it was the glowing Holocron, still on the floor.

Norval raised his saber. But just as he began to bring it back down another blast pelted the ship. It took Norval a moment to steady himself.

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That moment was all Obi-Wan needed. Reaching out with both hands, he used the Force to bring his lightsaber and the Holocron to him. He caught one in each hand as he leapt to his feet. Then, reigniting his lightsaber, he gracefully knocked Norval's weapon out of his hand and across the room. The crude handle shattered, and the interior crystals spilled across the floor.

Stunned, Norval climbed to his feet. "Your young Padawan would have made a wonderful Sith," he growled, his face contorting into an expression of rage. "Too bad he and that ship he's on are about to be destroyed by some friends of mine." He grinned. "They'll stop firing on me once they know you've been taken care of."

Obi-Wan wondered for a split second how Norval knew about Anakin. He supposed the evil young man made many things his business. But before he could consider the thought further, Norval lunged for the ship's communicator. "The Jedi has the Holocron!" he shouted. "You've got to get me out of here."

Obi-Wan turned and ran out of the room while Norval begged for help. The Jedi Master would not strike down an unarmed being. He would not leave his Padawan to face the mystery ship alone. And he would not be leaving without the Holocron this time.

Chapter Twenty-Six

All around him, doors began to slide closed. Obi-Wan hit the ground running. Squeezing sideways, he was just able to make it through the door he'd entered earlier and into the corridor. The last thing he saw was Norval laughing at him, a sneer twisting the lower half of his face.

"You have no idea what you are up against," he shouted.

Obi-Wan raced back down the white corridors to the shuttle. The glowing Holocron cast an eerie red glow on the walls. Obi-Wan ignored the queasiness in his gut and the weakness in his legs. He had to get to Anakin.

Within minutes Obi-Wan was hurtling out of the shuttle bay in the tiny vessel. Pressing his face to the transparisteel, he scanned the space for a sign of Anakin's ship. He didn't see one. Nor did he see the gray vessel. The earlier laser fire had stopped completely.

Obi-Wan sat back, discouraged. He was quite sure he'd know if his Padawan had been killed – he would have felt it. But where was he?

Obi-Wan programmed the shuttle to travel close to Norval's ship. He needed cover for as long as possible.

The shuttle glided through space, around to the other side of Norval's ship. Still Obi-Wan saw nothing. He was just about to

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give up and launch himself away when he spotted the small borrowed craft sneakily hiding right next to Norval's vessel. Obi-Wan was relieved. The boy was smart.

As soon as the shuttle had docked on the borrowed ship, Obi-Wan opened the door and hurried to the cargo bays. He had to secure the Holocron before he did anything else. He wanted someplace safe, and as far away from Lundi as possible.

Obi-Wan carefully placed the artifact in an onboard vault, and was immediately relieved to have it out of his hands. But he knew he wouldn't be completely comfortable until it was safely locked away in the Jedi archives on Coruscant, and perhaps not even then.

Obi-Wan rushed onto the bridge, eager to see his Padawan. But what he saw from the doorway was so surprising it stopped him in his tracks.

The professor's cage was empty and its door hung open. Anakin sat on the floor. He was cradling Lundi in his lap.

"I understand now," Lundi said in a hoarse whisper. "Some things are better left at the bottom of the sea."

Lundi gasped for air, and Obi-Wan suddenly realized that the Quermian was dying. He stepped forward and looked briefly into his eye. He finally saw what he'd always hoped he'd see – remorse and fear.

"I just... just hope it's not too late," Lundi finished. His fragile body shuddered and went limp, and Anakin laid him gently on the floor. Dr. Murk Lundi was dead.

Several emotions clashed inside Obi-Wan. Confusion, frustration, relief.

Anakin turned to face him. "I knew he was going to die," he explained. "And I didn't think he should end his life in a cage. So I let him out. I thought it was the right thing to do." His face was full of worry, and Obi-Wan realized that he had probably upset the boy with his outburst on Kodai.

"It is all right, Padawan," Obi-Wan said, placing a hand on Anakin's shoulder. He had much to learn as a Jedi Master, he

realized. And it had taken him and Qui-Gon years of working together to develop their strong ties of trust.

Those ties would develop for him and Anakin as well, in time. As for Lundi, it didn't matter now. The Quermian and his evil were gone.

Obi-Wan saw relief wash over Anakin's young face. "I'm sorry about the hologram message," he said. "I didn't mean to keep it from you, I just – "

Obi-Wan nodded. "I know," he said. "I should not have reacted so strongly. Next time we will both do better."

"I hope there – " Anakin was suddenly interrupted by a flash of blinding light, followed by an earsplitting roar. The ship hurtled backward as debris pummeled the exterior.

"Cut the power," Obi-Wan barked.

Anakin raced to the controls and flipped the master switch. A second later they were enveloped in darkness. If they were lucky they would hurtle away with the flaming wreckage unnoticed by the mysterious gray ship -

Obi-Wan held his breath. He reached out to the Force and felt immediately that Norval was dead. The poor clever student was wrong. Whoever was aboard the gray ship was not his friend. The blast had been intended for the Jedi, and whoever had caused the fiery explosion had been willing to kill an ally to keep the Sith Holocron out of Jedi hands.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The ship docked in the Coruscant hangar and Anakin and Obi-Wan disembarked. They'd drifted for hours while they patched the hyper-drive back together. Even with Anakin's skills as a mechanic they'd only just managed to limp the craft home. Now, there was much to do.

"I will see about getting the ship back to Kodai," Anakin offered.

Obi-Wan nodded. He had removed the Holocron from the cargo bay and was eager to get it to its permanent home in the archives. He'd learned to ignore the nausea, but would never be comfortable around this kind of dark power.

"Come to the Council Chambers when you are finished," Obi-Wan said. "I am sure the Council will want to hear from us as soon as possible."

Anakin nodded. "And Lundi?" he asked.

"I will have his body removed from the ship and brought into the Temple. The Council will decide what to do with him."

Obi-Wan watched Anakin cross the hangar, then hurried to the Jedi Temple. Jocasta Nu was waiting for him, the safe for the Holocron already open. They placed the artifact inside, then sealed the door and lowered it into the archive vault.

When the Holocron was out of view, Obi-Wan sighed in relief. He hoped he would never have to see or touch that evil object again.

By the time Obi-Wan arrived outside the Council Chambers door, Anakin was waiting for him. The boy smiled broadly as the Chambers door slid open.

"Congratulations," Depa Billaba said as they stepped inside. "A job well done."

"Indeed," agreed Saesee Tiin.

Anakin's eyes were lit with excitement. "It was a great mission," he said. "The most exciting one yet."

Obi-Wan noticed that Yoda's eyes registered concern as they rested on the boy. But the other Council members seemed only pleased and relieved to have the Sith Holocron safe in the Temple archives.

"Make a mission great, excitement does not,"

Yoda said gravely. The wise Master looked over at Obi-Wan, and Obi-Wan felt a twinge of guilt. Did Yoda think he was failing as Anakin's Master? Was he concerned that he was not capable of leading the boy?

These were his own fears, of course. Qui-Gon had been such a wonderful teacher. He was brave, strong, and wise. A gifted leader.

Would Qui-Gon think I am failing Anakin? That the boy needs an older and wiser Master?

Qui-Gon had been dead for almost four years, yet Obi-Wan suddenly felt his Master's presence. He was grateful for that, and took comfort in it. But sometimes he felt the loss so strongly that his chest ached.

"We will see that the remains of Professor Lundi are properly attended to," Mace Windu said.

The mention of Lundi's name brought Obi-Wan back to the moment.

"Well done, Jedi," Ki-Adi Mundi said, smiling. "You may go." The other Masters were nodding in agreement.

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As Obi-Wan followed his Padawan out of the chambers, several images flashed in his mind: Dr. Lundi's mad, contorted face; the crude drawing of the Sith Holocron; the strange gray ship and its mysterious passengers; the Holocron itself; and, for a brief moment, the anger he'd seen in Anakin's eyes. These were just a handful of many signs he had seen on this mission. Signs of things that would not easily be laid to rest....

**End of Volume Four
Concluded**

About the Author

JUDE WATSON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Jedi Quest and Jedi Apprentice series, as well as the Star Wars Journals *Darth Maul*, *Queen Amidala*, and *Princess Leia: Captive to Evil*. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.